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THE IDLERS

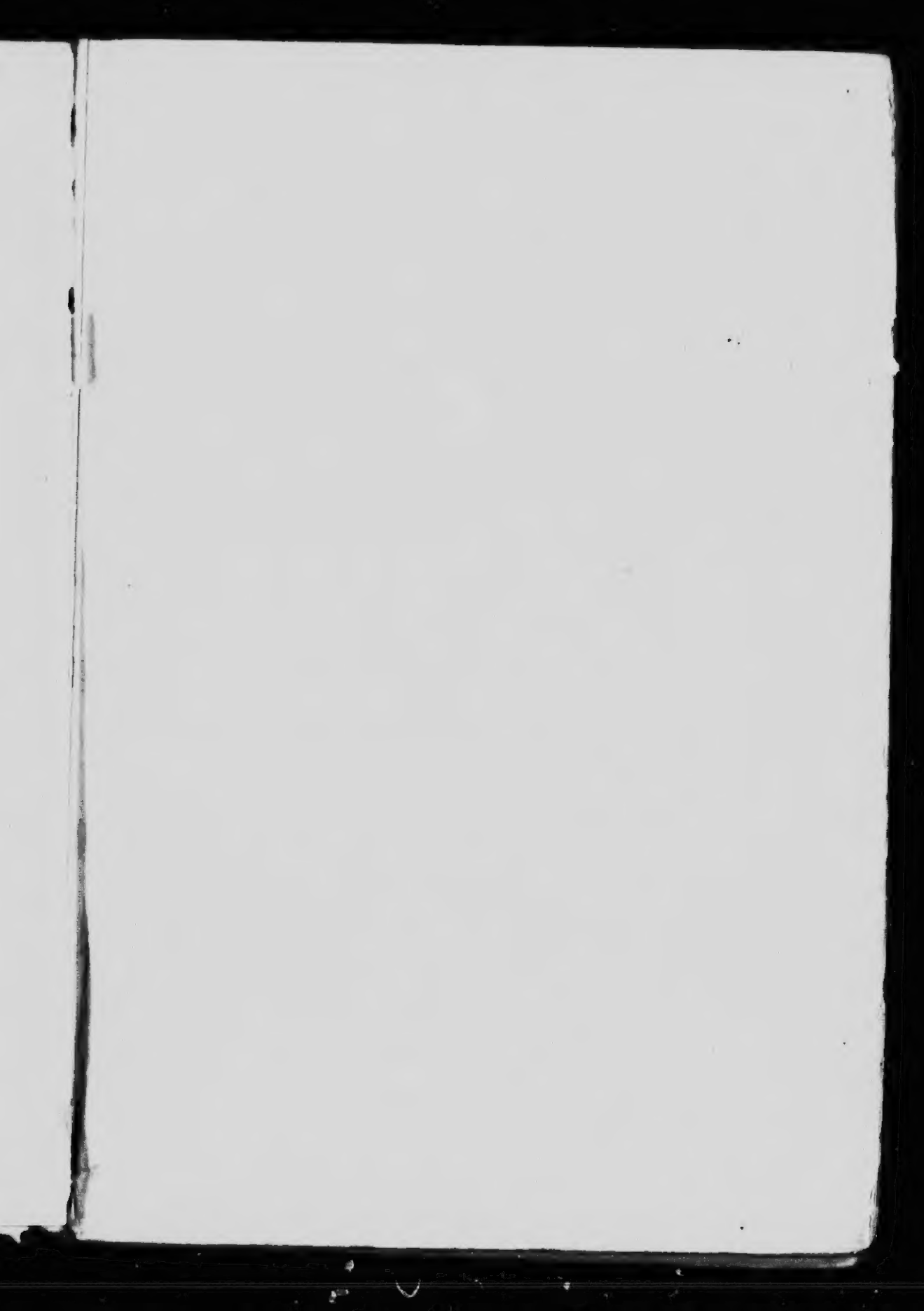
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MORLEY ROBERTS



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Renée Buckingham
From a Drawing by John C. Frohn

Écriture de l'Église

Par le P. de la Roche, de la Compagnie de Jésus

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THE IDLERS

By

MORLEY ROBERTS

Author of "Lady Penelope," "Rachel
Marr," "The Promotion of the
Admiral," etc.

With a Frontispiece in colour by

JOHN C. FROHN



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THE IDLERS

CHAPTER I.

As a boy, he was full of desire to be of service to England, for he had the instincts of a fighting race at the back of him. When he was dragged into the thorny thickets of history by a tutor, he almost forgot his dislike of learning as soon as he found that the history of his country was one of picturesque robbery and bloodshed. He smote the French at Crécy and Poitiers and Agincourt; he sank the Spaniards like kittens in a basket when the Armada invaded the British seas. He asked if he could see a live Spaniard now, and asked it eagerly and with clenched hands. But, as he said with a sigh, perhaps there weren't any. He determined to be a Drake. Some time later he fell across Southey's *Nelson*, and read it through a long summer night. He refused to go on with the vain task of learning French afterward. He

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went out ratting and rabbiting, and looked on what he slew as the enemies of his country. At twelve, he determined to be a soldier. Wellington, Clive, and Moore were his models. He determined to be thanked by both houses of Parliament. He saw himself made a peer and given a great sum in gold. Perhaps it would be over a hundred pounds, said Jack. He would then buy ferrets and a bull-pup, and have lessons in boxing by a real professional. He was wonderfully simple, as bull-headed as his ancestors, and as stupid as a typical squire in embryo.

There is no knowing what Jack Bexley might have done, even if he did not rival Nelson or Nicholson, if fate had been kinder or less kind to him in the way of parents, or if those parents had provided him with a spare brother to inherit the family estate and the title of baronet, if he were killed. But he was an only child, and his mother kept him by her side. His father, who was the only man of brains in the entire family from the time one very stupid ancestor bought the baronetcy, was so wise that all things were equal to him. To Sir John Etheridge Bexley nothing mattered but wisdom. He could give splendid advice, but always said that the worst advice was as good as the best. He saw that his wife was a fool, saw that she would

utterly spoil the lad, and advised her not to do so. After giving that advice, he retired upon his supports in the library and watched the process of his son's ruin, as if he were an astronomer watching an occultation of some star.

"Of course he ought to go to school," said Sir John, "but of course he won't go. She won't let him. However, all schools are equally bad, and every schoolmaster is a fool, or he wouldn't be a schoolmaster."

When a man is so wise as that, nothing can be done with him. He can also do nothing. Sir John did it gracefully and read books, though he said that books were foolishness, and that he would never have read them if he hadn't been married. He had married at forty. During the first forty years of his life he had read next to nothing, and knew more about men and women than any one he ever came across. He even knew Lady Bexley. Therefore she had her own way. Jack never went to school; and, by the time he had worn twenty tutors to rags, and thrown one into the biggest pond they had at Charteris, every one said he would go straight to the devil.

It was a great pity, for he was of the honest, straightforward bull's type that Englishmen love, since every typical Englishman in his heart detests

brains. Jack was the kind of boy to make the kind of man who can lead five hundred Tommies into action, and fail in the most splendid and honourable way to do anything expected of him, except to be cheered by the two hundred and fifty that he brings back, or who bring him back. When he was eighteen, he was over six feet and as strong as an oak. He was pink and brown like a sun-kissed peach; he could walk fifty miles and run fifteen without turning a hair. His eyes were blue, his hair darkish brown with red gleams in its curls, and, alas! all the women looked at him too kindly. Certainly he would go to the devil.

Till he was nineteen, however, boxing, ferreting, hunting, and harrying tutors (the tutor in the pond was the last) kept Jack clear of the girls. In between times he had fits of angry depression because he was not in the army and not going to be. If he boxed, then boxing became fighting, and something had to give way. He was so full of strength that it was hard, nay, almost impossible, to tire him. He couldn't tire himself, and he tired every one but his father and his mother. Lady Bexley believed him the finest product of the modern ages. He was a mixture of Hercules, Apollo, and Sir Galahad, and he was her only son. She said he was clever. She proposed, on that account, to make

a clergyman of him. This notion of hers caused the only real riot she ever had with him.

"What! a parson," said Jack. Perhaps he shouted. "A parson like Mr. Vokes?"

Poor Vokes was the rector of Charteris. He had eloquence of a sort, and no more intellect than a flatfish. As a result of his vanity, he was used by every lazy person for miles around. He would have crawled a hundred miles on his belly to preach to a duke. He used to give advice to Jack.

"Oh, my darling, it would be so nice for you to be one," said his mother. She clasped her hands and prayed to him.

"Well, I won't be," said Jack, "that's flat. I'd as soon be a lawyer, or a bootblack. Vokes is a silly fool, all jaw, and to be a clergyman, — oh, Lord —"

He broke off. To be a clergyman meant to take on a kind of eternal contract to be as good as you knew how, and you couldn't take on that contract without being better than most folks to start with. Jack firmly believed he was about as bad as he could be, and he found this conviction of sin very comforting.

"It would keep you from the dangers of the world," said his mother, thus showing her knowledge of the Church and the world. Sir John, who

was smoking a cigar and listening, cackled audibly.

"How can you laugh, John?" asked his wife. He regarded her with an air of infinite curiosity and interest, peculiarly characteristic of him. Nothing made her so uneasy.

"Instead of laughing, you ought to help me to persuade Jack to do his duty," said Lady Bexley, plaintively.

"My boy, always do your duty," said the father; "all you have to do is to find out what it is. When you are in doubt, come to me and we will discuss the matter quietly."

Jack declined to discuss the duty of being a parson. "I'm not going to be a parson," he roared. "I'd rather be a gamekeeper. You wouldn't let me be a soldier or a sailor, and now I won't be anything."

After roaring, he sulked, and Lady Bexley wept, while her husband consoled her by telling her that she didn't know when she was well off.

"He might have been a thorough-paced young blackguard, the way we've brought him up, and he isn't. I made up my mind years ago that he was going to bring my gray hairs with sorrow to the grave, my dear."

He stroked a luxurious crop of shining white hair as he spoke.

"We have brought him up in the proper and right way," sobbed his wife.

"It's comforting to think how successful we have been on the whole," said the father. "He refuses to enter the Church, like a man."

"You are an atheist."

"I beg your pardon, my dear —"

"An atheist, John!"

"It is a misconception on your part, my dear," said Sir John. "To disagree with you on points of theology is not to be an atheist. However, I waive the point and go on with Jack."

They went on with Jack, and Jack went out and shot a number of wretched rabbits, as if he were bagging clergymen. Later in the day he went in to see his father, with whom he was always on the most intimate and friendly terms.

"Don't you think it rot of mother to want me to be a clergyman, guv'nor?"

"Rot of the worst sort, my boy," said Sir John.

"I'm doin' no sort of good as it is, sir."

"You are not," said the parent. "I fear you will give lots of trouble, Jack, though you are a good boy, as boys go."

"What kind of trouble, sir?" asked Jack. "I'm very angry with mother. She did it."

"She did, Jack," sighed Sir John. "She does all that is done, and I do all that isn't. I meant you to be a soldier when you were born. If you had a brother or two, it wouldn't matter so much."

"Bein' an only son is rot," said Jack, sulkily. "It makes me wild."

"Are you wild, my boy?" asked the wise father. "Don't be wild; on the whole, bein' wild is a mistake. Do you want another hunter?"

"Of course I do," said Jack. "But huntin' is rot, I can see that."

"It is undiluted idiocy, my boy," said Sir John, "but I can't stop it. You, I suppose, are what is known as a good sportsman, Jack?"

Jack believed that he was, but he was so savage that he said that sport was rot.

"So it is," said his father; "it is, without doubt, nothing but a miserable survival of comparatively useless instincts. But as you have no brains, Jack, you may as well be a sportsman, and you can get a new hunter from Jenks. I've told him how far I'll go in the matter of prices. I told him this morning when your mother said she was goin' to make a parson of you. Hunt all you can, and leave the girls alone."

Jack started, blushed, and looked out of the window. He wondered how the devil the gov'nor knew so much. It was only during the last six months that he had thought of girls at all.

"Thanks, sir," mumbled Jack. "I'll see Jenks."

He marched out, and Sir John sighed.

"I know too much," said Sir John, "that's what's the matter with me. The girls will be hunting him. There's not a farmer's daughter round here that doesn't look at him when he rides by as if she could eat him. I wish I was nineteen, with a colour like his and his strength and all the girls after me."

He sighed again and then smiled, and went hunting again in the wild country of his memory. There were many people who said he was a very bad man. He never pretended to himself that he was not a human being. But he often doubted if his wife was.

"Well, Jack's all right, even if he does come a mucker," said the wise father. If he had not married Mary Carfax, who was never a beauty, and had no wit to balance the lack of it, he wouldn't have had Jack, and he loved the boy almost more than wisely.

And Jack loved him so much that when the inevitable came, and there was trouble with the game-

keeper's daughter, he went and told his father. It was a very remarkable interview.

"If you please, guv'nor," said Jack, awkwardly.

"Yes, my boy," replied his father; "what is it?"

They were in the garden together. Sir John was carrying a spud and executing dandelions.

"You always said I was to come to you if I was in any kind of trouble, didn't you?" asked Jack, nervously.

"Of course," said Sir John; "what the devil's your dad for but to give you advice and do the best he can? What's the use of being older if you don't look wiser? Jack, my boy, I'm wise to a perfectly sickening extent, and my sympathy for my own follies is not so great but that I can spare you some, whatever kind of an ass you have made of yourself."

He looked at him kindly.

"Well, my boy, what kind of an ass are you?"

Jack looked down at the dandelions.

"The very worst, guv'nor."

Sir John chopped a weed.

"I've been expectin' it, Jack. Girls, I suppose!"

"Yes, father."

"It might be worse," said Sir John, but what could be worse he didn't say. "I'm sorry for it,

but what good will it do if I damn your eyes and smash things, Jack, and make myself ill? Tell me what it is."

Jack mumbled something.

"Has it come out, then?" asked the moral father.

"I — think so," said Jack.

"Who is it?"

Jack said nothing, and Sir John shook his head at him.

"It mustn't occur again," said Sir John. "This will be a warning to you. I knew damn well it would happen."

Then he made a most remarkable statement, which made Jack jump as if he were shot.

"I told her father to send her away the best part of a year ago."

"Oh, Lord," said Jack. But Sir John dropped his spud and walked off. He left the garden, and went into the field, across which led the path that ran to the village. It was the nearest way to the head gamekeeper's cottage.

There were many pretty girls about Charteris and its neighbourhood, many who sighed when Jack rode past. Some chased him, but few with such ardour as Sam Botfield's daughter. There was no doubt that she was pretty; there were some doubts

as to her innocence. In fact, she knew what was o'clock at any hour of the day except when the young squire was about, and then it was either black midnight or high noon with her. She adored him in a very healthy and sane fashion, and, though she had no heart to break, it beat hard when his eye, hitherto set on foxes and hares and ferrets and rabbits, woke to the fact that the proper pursuit of man was woman. She went to Charteris House on every occasion she could squeeze out an excuse for going. She waylaid him in the lanes and smiled sweetly. Jack became conscious that Molly Botfield was to be met with in woods: he found her picking daffodils. She dropped them and said readily enough:

"Oh, Lord, sir, how you startled me!"

She had a fine colour, a plump figure, and white teeth that could break cobnuts. She was a year older than Jack. That is to say, she was a woman and he was a boy.

"I knew what would happen," said Sir John, as he walked across the fields. "The little devil was always about. Botfield is a sensible man. I believe he would sooner cut the girl's throat than have words with me. He shall have that new cottage. I suppose he knew this a week ago when he

spoke to me about it. Sam Botfield is as cunning as a ferret."

He found Sam at home and called him outside. Botfield came hurriedly. Perhaps he was a trifle less obsequious than usual. There are some who would have said he was a little uplifted in his mind.

It is hard to fathom any one's heart, but it was probably true. There have been noble families proud of odd things when royalties condescended, and Sir John Bexley was the king to Sam Botfield. But he put on a proper air of sorrow.

"This is a bad business, Botfield," said his master.

"It is fair rotten, Sir John," replied the gamekeeper without any pretence of not understanding.

"I warned you of this six months ago, Botfield."

"You did, sir, I own it freely," said Botfield.

"I'm a downcast man this day, Sir John, and the missis is weepin' in the washus which 'asn't any roof to speak of."

"Hasn't it?" asked Sir John, with much interest. "Does the rain come in?"

"Like as if it were a colander. But the missis doesn't care now. She says she wants to die, Sir John."

"Dear me," said Sir John, anxiously. He was quite aware that Mrs. Botfield's nose was flattened

against the window between two geraniums. Her complexion and that of the flowers were equally healthy. "She mustn't do that, Botfield. What has become of the girl?"

"I've packed the young trollop off to her grandmother's, sir," replied the gamekeeper. "I'm a broken-hearted man, Sir John, and to think that Master Jack —"

"Hush, hush," said Sir John, "don't let us mention names, Botfield. By the way, does all your roof leak?"

"Like a sieve," said Botfield. "It's like lyin' out watchin' for poachers in the rain to go to bed in this cottage, Sir John. The missis says she's fair broken-hearted dryin' sheets and blankets."

"You'll want a new cottage before winter, then?" asked his master.

"Thank you kindly, Sir John," said Botfield, "but though I'd like it, and so would the missis, what is a cottage to a broken-hearted man whose daughter 'as gone wrong?"

Sir John nodded sympathetically.

"That's so, Botfield, but still a good cottage is better than a poor one, and five rooms better than four, and a wash-house that doesn't leak than one that does."

He looked at Botfield inquiringly.

"I own it freely," said Botfield, "but a broken-hearted man —"

"I'll put it in hand at once," said Sir John. "And all expenses connected with Molly I'll pay, of course. What will they come to, Botfield?"

"Five bob a week for fourteen years is the law, Sir John," said Botfield, promptly, "seein' that it's Master Jack —"

"Hush," said Sir John, with a frown, "let us leave him out. I see you are a sensible man, Botfield."

"I do have that name round about," said the gamekeeper.

"I'll make the expenses ten shillings a week while you stay with me, Botfield, and there will be no need to drag in my son's name. It is a great blow to me, too, Botfield, and if Lady Bexley heard of it, I don't know what would happen."

"Her bein' so delicate, too," said Botfield. As a matter of fact, Lady Bexley was as big and strong as a Shire mare. "Thank you kindly, Sir John. You was always the best gentleman I ever set eyes on, and, seein' that I taught Master Jack all that he do know about beasts, I'd be sorry to part with either of 'ee, Sir John. And as for Molly, dang 'er, I always told the missis she was likely to do as she shouldn't. And the missis has tore her hair

out by handfuls over chaps before Master Jack ever cast his eyes on her."

Sir John sighed.

"It's a sad world we live in, Botfield."

Botfield was very cheerful, however.

"It might be worse, Sir John. Molly might ha' gone wrong with a chap that couldn't have put up even half a crown a week."

"So she might," said Sir John. "I didn't think of that."

"I've thought of it often, I can tell 'ee, Sir John," said Botfield, promptly, "and on your side, Sir John, the young master might have fell across a gal with a father that would have got drunk and told the whole village about 'un, and have bled 'ee fair to death, Sir John."

"That's so," said Sir John. "I'll put the cottage in hand at once, and here's the first week's ten shillings, Botfield."

"Thank you kindly, you was always a generous gentleman, Sir John."

But when his master was out of sight, Botfield slapped his thigh.

"The weekly money don't begin till the child's born," said Botfield. "Him a magistrate and not know that!"

On the whole, Jack got out of this sad trouble

very easily, and it was all because he and his father were real friends. Whether so wicked a man as his father was a good person to have for a friend moralists must determine. Perhaps it would have been better to make a horrible uproar about this sad escapade. Some fathers would have broken furniture and Jack's head. Jack would have promptly knocked his father down and would have enlisted. Then every one would have been satisfied with every one else, and all concerned would have been hideously wretched. As to Botfield, it is impossible to defend him. He got a new cottage and a permanent addition of ten shillings a week out of Molly's misfortune. He should have beaten Molly, and turned her out to become a street-walker. He ought to have left Sir John's employ. In that case, he would have taken to drink, and he and his wife would have gone to the workhouse. But he acted otherwise than he should have done, and was doubtless a loathsome ruffian. He met Jack the very next day, and didn't try to knock him down. He shook his head and touched his cap and said:

"Oh, Master Jack, did 'ee still want to buy that tarrier?" Jack didn't want to buy it; but he did buy it all the same, and gave two pounds for a fox-terrier worth fifteen shillings.

"Molly be to her grandmother's," said Botfield, shaking his head.

And poor Jack blushed. The world is full of odd folk.

CHAPTER II.

JACK never read a book if he could help it, unless it was something to do with hunting or fishing. The *Field* was enough for him. At the age of twenty, he was perhaps the finest and most ignorant all-round Englishman between the Tweed and the Torridge. He had forgotten the Latin grammar, and that was his claim to education. He spelt amazingly, and was totally untrammelled by tradition in all such matters. But he knew all about fish, as he believed, for he had caught several salmon at his cousin's place in Scotland. At Charteris there were some foxes' tails. He could shoot with the first flight of shots. After his calamity with Molly Botfield, he was shy with women, and worked harder than ever at field sports. And all the time he groaned that he was not in the army. And so did his father.

"Nevertheless," said Sir John, "he is such an ass that I'm afraid he would have never passed."

It was the old man's only consolation.

"I suppose I am a jolly idiot, you know," said Jack to his father.

"My dear boy, I'm afraid you are," replied his father, "but if you are one kind, I'm another."

Jack wasn't such a fool as not to know that "the governor" was thinking that his mother ruled the house.

"It ain't too late," said Jack. He meant the army was still open to him. And Sir John grunted and groaned.

"My dear boy," was all he could say. What he meant, Jack knew. The truth is, that Jack was not wholly a fool, unless to be oversoft to his parents was to be one. He sighed bitterly.

"The best thing for him will be to get married," thought his father. "I wish he could fall in love with some one. It would give him something to do and something to think of."

But Jack fell in love with no one. The women fell in love with him instead, and he was badly scared of them. When he got over terror, there would be trouble, as Sir John knew only too well. He was big, strong, handsome, idle, and yet discontented with an idle life. When he got over repining at idleness, when he became used to it, as no healthy boy can without a bad time, the women would get him and bring him down as surely as he brought down a pheasant. At twenty-one Jack began to run up to town pretty frequently.

Sir John Bexley was not a very rich man; he had about £3,000 a year, some of it derived from investments, some from houses in Charteris Wells, the nearest town, and the rest from five farms, including the home farm at Charteris House, which he pretended to farm himself. So he had no house in town. Lady Bexley loathed London. She said it was immoral; perhaps it is. She also said that Jack must not live in an immoral place. She also said that London was not healthy enough for Jack. She said that Jack was really delicate. He had had an attack of bronchitis after the measles. This was scarcely any wonder, as he had got out of bed and out of window in the night to look after some tame rabbits. This was when he was twelve. Since then he had never had a cold, and he was forty-three inches around the chest. Lady Bexley loved to put a mustard plaster on that chest, and at times Jack indulged her motherly fancy. He loved her very sincerely, and he certainly knew he was not the stupidest person in the house. If he ever annoyed her seriously, as he did when he would not go to hear Mr. Vokes fall asleep over the Book of Common Prayer, and make others fall asleep when he preached, Jack used to be very kind.

"I think, mother, I should like to have a mustard plaster on to-night."

"Oh, my dear, I thought you coughed. I'll come up when you are in bed," said Lady Bexley. She bustled away and made the plaster with her own mighty hands.

"You are a scoundrel, Jack," said his father. "What do you do with the plaster?"

"Put it on the chair by my bed, sir," said his son. "The paint's all off it. Mother makes stingers, I can tell you."

"I don't believe he's half the fool he makes out," said Sir John.

As there was no town house, Jack found it very convenient to have chambers in London. Lady Bexley wept about it, but he had a plaster on that night. He took a tin of mustard and some linseed meal and bandages up to town the first time he slept there. That was on a Boat-race night, for one of the Oxford crew was a friend of his and the son of a neighbour.

"Did you put a plaster on?" asked Lady Bexley, when he returned.

"I never slept a wink till early morning," replied Jack, evasively.

"There is no need to make them as hot as that," said his mother. "Did you take the skin off? I hope not."

The only skin Jack had taken off came from his

knuckles. He said a policeman had been rude to him.

"He pushed me, guv'nor, and said 'move on,'" Jack told his father with much indignation.

"I never knew a Bexley to be pushed before, except for money," said Sir John, pensively.

Jack made friends in London, and Sir John gave him a lot of good advice on the subject. He was as wise as Polonius. Advice ran off Jack's mind like water off a duck's back. He knew that his father thought advice-giving was foolishness.

"I've often heard you say it ain't any good givin' good advice, guv'nor," said Jack.

Sir John put the tips of his fingers together and leant back in his chair.

"It is never taken, I know," said he, "unless it is bad advice, but, for all that, what I say may encourage you to think at hours when you have nothing else to do. When you find out by experience that what I said was true, you *may* possibly alter your opinion. My advice will then be an additional straw to turn the scale. If I advise you now never to strike a policeman in the execution of his duty, you will probably scorn my advice. Nevertheless, when you have escaped going to jail for it by the exertions of your friends and the expenditure of considerable money, you will say that, on

the whole, my advice was well founded. It will help you to say, 'All right, constable, I'll go quietly.' And now my advice is to avoid the idle middle classes in London, especially the women. When you have made an appearance in the divorce court, which I can assure you is a very disagreeable experience, you will perhaps avoid a second one. If you must associate with idle people, associate with the upper classes. They are used to idleness, and do not abuse it so much as those who behave in their way like slaves on a bank holiday. I detest the upper middle classes, Jack. They haven't the virtues of their own class or of the class they ape. They have the vices of both."

The truth is that the Bexleys had been aristocrats before they were baronets, and the title did not cause their downfall, or degrade them in any way.

But Jack was right on the whole. The fine points of psychology that pleased his father were lost on him. The truth was that idleness and such a father and mother were bound to have their natural results. It is no good putting a keg of gunpowder in the fire and advising it not to explode. Jack stayed in town a week at a time, and then a month at a time.

"If you do get into the divorce court, Jack," said his father, "it won't console your mother if you

put all the mustard on your chest that is now on the market."

Jack wriggled uneasily and frowned. He changed the conversation so clumsily that Sir John wrote to an old friend of his to make a few inquiries about him. Jack didn't make his father his confidant any more, and, when he answered any lightly put but carefully considered questions, he replied with generalities. Mr. Cassilis answered Sir John's letter very briefly.

"I hear Mrs. Buckingham has your boy in tow. I suppose you have heard of her. The husband makes jam and biscuits, and she is as pretty as the very devil. I'd look after him if I were you."

Sir John sighed. Though he did not live in town, he had heard a little about Mrs. Buckingham. He walked up and down the room for a few minutes, and then rang the bell and ordered his horse. He rode over to Ashwood, a place about five miles away, to see his friend Thomas Clarendon.

"It might be worked. It must be," said Sir John. "I think Cecilia Clarendon is the very girl for him. If I'm not mistaken, there is a soft spot for Jack in her hard little heart."

He found Clarendon at home in his library, at work on a paper which dealt with subsoil and drainage. He was always at work. He was a

member of Parliament, a justice of the peace, the deputy chairman of the County Quarter Sessions, and a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society. If he had nothing else to do, he wrote to the *Times*. He was an authority on manures and drainage, and on education, and he had an exceedingly pretty daughter, who took after his dead wife, and two exceedingly ugly sons, who took after himself. He was a wonderfully loud talker, and as big a bore as could be found in England, but he was very kind. He said that no one but Bexley understood his character. From this it may be inferred that the baronet was universally popular. He understood human nature.

"Well, Tom," said Sir John.

"My dear fellow," cried Clarendon. He jumped out of his chair and grasped his friend's hand as if Sir John had just returned from the Antarctic. "I'm delighted to see you. But what has brought you over so early?"

He pushed Bexley into a chair as if he loved him, as indeed he did, and told him all about sub-soil drainage.

"I'm reading the paper to the Society," said Clarendon, eagerly. "I'm throwing a new light on a difficult subject. It must be dealt with by Parliament. It shall be before I'm much older."

"I came over —" began Bexley.

"And unless there is a scheme got up for the proper use of manures, we shall cease to be an agricultural nation," said Clarendon. "I'm drafting a bill now."

"I came over to discuss these things with you," said Bexley, calmly. "That is, I meant to. I've been applying my mind to drainage and manures lately. But just as I was promising to thrash these things out with you, I got a letter which put them out of my head."

Clarendon roared delightedly.

"Ah, I know what it's about. You must stand at last, my dear fellow. You can put that radical chap in the ditch. I knew they would write to you," he said, as he slapped his thigh. It was a mighty limb. But Clarendon was a big man and inclined to be stout.

"Oh, ah," said the baronet, "Smith did write to me. But I told him I wouldn't."

"I'm disappointed," said Clarendon, "deeply disappointed. With you as my colleague, we could do much in the House. You don't know how persuasive you are. I call a spade a spade, and if I see a damn fool in front of me, I can't tell him he is a brilliant example of the typical Englishman."

Bexley laughed.

"Can't you? Now I should have thought you might have done that easily."

"It goes against the grain," said Clarendon, smiting the oak table. "I'm too damn straight and too honest for politics. But with you by my side —"

"I want to be," said Bexley. "Tom, how old is your daughter now?"

"Cecilia? Nineteen, I believe. Let me look it up. I keep notes of these things. Ah, she is nineteen and two months."

"She's a devilish pretty girl," said Bexley, thoughtfully.

"Not a prettier in the country, nor a better, nor a dearer, or softer and sweeter creature in all the counties of England. She reminds me more and more of her mother. She won't let me have a secretary. She types my articles for me, and knows as much about my affairs as I do," said Clarendon, who now looked more like a father than an authority on fertilizers. "Why do you speak of her? She says you're a duck."

"Damn," said Bexley. "I hate pretty young girls to call me a duck. It means I'm past killing. But I admire her amazingly. How did she get on with my boy?"

The justice of the peace shook his head.

"She doesn't seem to like him, my dear chap; runs him down when I mention him. Between you and me, she says he's a fool."

"Well, he is a fool, I suppose," said the fool's father, "and we've managed to spoil him between us. However, he's a good sort, really, and you know it."

"I think he's a splendid example of the typical young Englishman," said Clarendon, warmly.

Bexley smiled.

"I think so myself, my dear boy. But he's running a bit wild in town now, and that's why I came over to see you. I wish he was married, Tom."

"I shouldn't wonder but what it would be a good thing. I was wild myself before I married. It steadied me wonderfully; gave me something to do. To look after and guide a young and innocent woman is a steadier, I can tell you. My wife never had a thought apart from me, John, not a thought. I guided her through life, and, though she has gone, I couldn't be wild now," he sighed.

"No more could I," sighed the baronet. "Don't you think it would be a good thing if Cecilia married, Tom?"

Clarendon's jaw fell.

"I couldn't get on without her. She knows it, and has refused ten offers wholly on my account."

said the father, proudly. "She says so. Some were good. Young Lashmore was one of 'em. The old earl came over to see me about it, said his son would go to the deuce if she didn't relent. But she stuck to her old dad, and that very day typed me a long letter to the *Times* about drainage. That's a girl for you."

He looked at Bexley with tears in his eyes.

"She's a damn fine girl," said Bexley. "Refused young Lashmore, did she?"

"I don't care," cried Clarendon.

"She would have gone out of your life altogether," said Bexley. "She ought to marry the son of a neighbour, Tom."

"It would be better, wouldn't it?" replied the father. "But I believe she'll never leave me, old boy. There's no one she has any fancy for."

"I want her to marry my boy," said the baronet. Clarendon fell back in his chair.

"Eh?"

"My boy, Jack," said Bexley.

Clarendon sighed.

"I wish she would, but she doesn't take to him. If she's said so once, she's said so a dozen times."

"All the better," replied Bexley.

"She says he knows far too well that he's a handsome chap," said Clarendon.

"That's all right," said Bexley.

"She said she would rather be an old maid than marry any one like him. I think she hates him, John."

"Then we'll consider it settled that they are to marry if we can arrange it," said the baronet, firmly. "Of course, being a baronet is a poor thing. But you won't think any the worse of me for that. It wasn't my fault, you know."

Clarendon shook his head.

"You are a very curious character, John, and there are times when I imagine that I don't quite understand you —"

"Nonsense," said Bexley.

"Oh, yes, there are," insisted Clarendon. "But, if your boy can persuade her, I'll consent. He can't. When did he think of this?"

"Well," said Bexley, "I've thought of it for him. He knows nothing about it. You mustn't drop a word about it to Cecilia. This is our plan, Tom. I know he likes her very much, and he'll make a good husband if she's got half the sense that you have."

"I believe she's no fool, though so soft-hearted," said Clarendon. "You think I should say nothing?"

"I feel sure you shouldn't, but, if you think it

over and come to a different conclusion, I shall have nothing to say. I defer to your judgment."

"I'll say nothing," nodded Clarendon. "But did you say Jack was running wild? He must stand for Parliament, if you won't. He's a brilliant example of — but do you mean very wild?"

Bexley explained that he did not mean very wild, but rather wild, and that was satisfactory to Tom Clarendon.

"No wilder than you and I at the same age," said he. "We were sad dogs thirty years ago, Tom."

"So we were," said Tom Clarendon, who was tickled to death at being included in the same class of roisterers as Bexley. For Bexley had been notorious. "So we were, John. Do you remember little Mrs. Shoosmith?"

"Bless my heart," sighed Bexley, who hadn't the least idea who Mrs. Shoosmith was.

"She kept that tobacconist's shop in the Haymarket," said the wild Clarendon. "Well, well, boys will be boys! I hope Cecilia will see it as we see it, John. I think your boy Jack is a brilliant example —"

"So do I, Tom."

"Of the typical young Englishman," said Tom. He added in the platform tone, "one of those Eng-

lishmen to whom we, who are on the verge of departure from the business of the Empire, can trust the destinies of England."

"I'll tell him you said so," said Bexley. "And now about these drains, Tom."

"We'll have lunch first," cried Clarendon, "and you can see Cecilia. After lunch, I can explain the whole matter in less than two hours."

Bexley sighed. He wanted to get back home and go up to town to see Cassilis, and hear a little more about Mrs. Buckingham. But he stuck to his post and made love to his future daughter-in-law; while she made up for her detestation of Jack by being exceedingly pleasant to his father.

She was always pleasant to fathers. All old and oldish men loved her because she was pleasant. They said it was a terrible thing that the older men got, the more they appreciated beauty and tenderness. She almost always said the right thing to them. But, even if she said the wrong thing, she did it so sweetly that it only became an additional proof of her obvious innocence. They raved about her to their wives, thus proving once more man's infinite capacity for going wrong in any way that offers itself.

The elderly women, wives and widows, did not approve of her. She treated them very sweetly

and with absolute correctness, but they found her unsympathetic. She would not discuss servants, though she was practically her father's housekeeper. The old housekeeper was little more than a visitor who had come to stay, for Mr. Clarendon was even kinder to his dependents than Sir John Bexley. Cecilia would not talk about Sunday school, either, though she taught at one. When clergymen were spoken of, she became weary. The old ladies said she was conceited without natural interests. She had flouted many of their sons, even at eighteen.

The young men never knew what to make of her. The "brilliant examples of typical Englishmen" who stayed at home in country-houses with their parents, and knew a tenth as much about horses as their grooms, and a quarter as much about dogs as the gamekeeper, never knew what would interest her. She yawned in their faces with the utmost carelessness. When she did not yawn, she was vicious. She asked them questions which implied something more than a knowledge of the Badminton Series. They knew that she read German and French and Italian, and they averred sulkily that she ought to marry a schoolmaster.

"I certainly won't marry a silly boy to be a schoolmistress to," said Cecilia. She was much older than her years when youth followed in her

train. Even her father thought it probable that she would marry some one in particular, if she married at all. The proposal that she should marry Jack was, on the whole, pleasing; but in his heart he thought she would marry a professor, perhaps an oldish member of the Royal Society. She knew a good deal of mathematics, and said that the calculus was more interesting than county conversation.

It seems probable that neither the old men, nor the old ladies, nor the young men knew anything whatever about her. The only people who really liked her were the young girls who were in love with Dick and Tom and Harry. It was only with them that she was at all youthful. When she had driven Dick into the arms of Amelia, Tom into the embraces of Selina, and Harry into church with Amy, she said the nicest things about them. The girls said she would never marry. It seems probable that they knew as much about her as the others, even when they hugged her and told her all about it.

The simple truth is, of course, tolerably simple. She had a character of her own. It is the most complex thing on earth.

"My dear Cecilia," said Sir John Bexley. He held both her hands and looked into her beautifully

innocent face. "It is more than a month since I saw you."

"It's exactly six weeks to-day," said Cecilia.

"What a memory you have, my dear," said Sir John, much complimented.

"In some ways it is very bad," said Cecilia. "I forget about everything I ought to remember."

"If you remember me, I shall not mind whom you forget," said the old courtier. "My dear, I think you have grown."

She played seventeen with him.

"I believe I have a little," said Cecilia, who knew better.

"But you are no prettier than you were," said Sir John. He sighed.

"Hullo, John, my boy," roared Clarendon, "you used to be complimentary."

"It is the nicest compliment ever paid me, papa," said Cecilia. "Sir John was always nice to me since I was up to his knee."

They went in to lunch, and Cecilia spoke of Jack.

"He's in town," said Jack's father, "and what is more, he went up to town the day after he came over here last. I believe you made game of him, Cecilia."

"I believe I did, a little," said Cecilia, penitently. Her father bellowed.

"A little! John, she chased him off the place. If I'd been Jack I'd ha' boxed her pink ears, or, if they ain't pink, I'd ha' made 'em."

"His were pink, I remember," said Innocence. "He said German was rot, and that no girl who loved her country ought to know it. He said any language spoken by people who were England's enemies was rot."

"He's very patriotic," owned Bexley, "but I didn't know he carried it so far. Did you give it to him, Cecilia?"

Cecilia shook her head.

"Not really, it's dad's fun. I had been typing drains all the morning, and making papa spell right, and when Jack came I was cross. I think he's a very nice boy really."

And the nice boy was running around with Mrs. Buckingham.

"So he is," said Bexley; "he's as straight as a die, and, if he's not brilliant, there are bigger fools than Jack. I ought to have let him go into the army."

He sighed a little.

"But with an only son and Lady Bexley, it's hard to know what to do," he added. "If he'd been a soldier, he could have occupied his mind."

"There ain't much in the army to do that, if a

man has a mind," said Clarendon. "I give you my word the service members in the House haven't a mind between them. I've got up and as good as said so, said it delicately, you know, so that every one but them knew what I was gettin' at. The House roared, I can tell you."

Clarendon, in the House or out of it, had the delicacy of a bull at a gate, combined with the ample tact of a steam-roller.

"It's a pity he hasn't something to do," said Cecilia. "I told him he ought to farm something, if he was fit for nothing else. But that was only chaff, Sir John. I think he's really quite clever in many ways. And he wants to work at something. He's the only young man here who does."

It was the "oldest" thing she had ever said to Jack's father, and it opened his eyes a little. He looked at her curiously, and she looked down at the table.

"If I'd been Jack, I'd ha' boxed your ears, my gal," said Clarendon, with a hearty guffaw. "Rummy the way the new generation of girls speak, ain't it, John?"

Bexley paid no attention to Clarendon.

"He told you he wants to work, eh?"

"Yes," said Cecilia.

"Yet he's very reserved about such things."

"I know he is," said Cecilia, quietly. "But he feels it, all the same."

"He's a good son, I know," said Bexley.

"My son Ned is showin' 'em what the Clarendon stock is worth in Burmah," said Clarendon. "Show Sir John his last letter, Ciss. He's running a district as big as England with two men and a boy and the toe of his boot. Full o' tact, Ned is. The niggers fall down in front of him. Rummy show, our Empire!"

They left the table, and Bexley walked out into the garden with Cecilia.

"It's a pity Jack didn't have his own way about the army," said Bexley. "As it is, I suppose there's nothing for it now. I wish he could marry and settle down."

Cecilia picked some flowers and gave some to her guest.

"I kiss your hands," said Bexley. "He thinks a good deal of your opinion, Cecilia, so when you see him, don't rag the boy too much. He has brains enough to know a clever woman when he sees one."

He caught her liquid dark eye, and was astounded to see what a woman was beside him.

"I'm a bit anxious about him, my dear," said Bexley. "You see he's very young, and too infernally handsome to be running loose in town."

He said you were the only girl with a real head in the county. He saw more in his thick-headed way than I've done till to-day."

He stopped and looked at her, and for the first time she coloured a little. Though she was dark, she was naturally pale, and the colour gave her an extraordinary beauty which she usually lacked.

"By Jove, you *are* a deal prettier than you were," said Bexley. "You've fooled me for years, my dear."

"Oh, Sir John!" said Cecilia.

"I thought you were still a little girl, — you're a clever woman."

She smiled at him.

"Be a bit nice to Jack, Cecilia. You could twist him round that little finger of yours."

"Oh, I like him, really," said Cecilia.

Bexley opened his lips, as if he were going to speak, but he thought better or worse of it.

"Now for subsoil drainage and a cigar," he sighed.

Cecilia put her hand on his arm.

"You're very nice to papa, you know," she said, with a smile.

"Well, you're very nice to me," said Sir John. And when he was deep in the soil, Cecilia walked among the roses.

CHAPTER III.

IN the meantime it was not only old Cassilis who was talking about Jack in town. He hadn't done Church Parade in the Row three times before every one knew who the handsome young dog was. Ancient bucks of his father's day took him by the hand and swore he was the living image of Sir John Bexley. They asked him to dinner at their clubs, and told him all about themselves, till he nearly died of them. They took him home, and told their wives all about his father, throwing out hints, as they prosed, of the chimes they had heard at midnight before marriage and gout got hold of them. The wives adored Jack, he was so simple and so innocent.

The daughters put on their best frocks for the lad, and found him shy. They tried to teach him love and bridge, but he was luckily such an ass that he could play at neither. It was a good thing for him, as far as cards were concerned, for, though his allowance was five hundred a year over and above the run of his teeth at home and the two horses kept for him, he soon found it little enough.

His desire to do something still persisted in him. He saw the Life Guardsmen at the Horse Guards with tears in his eyes, and the only old friend of his father's that he could swallow whole was General Bigham, who gave him bad dinners and good yarns about India. He had some wild ideas of enlisting, after all, and working for a commission, for he got it into his head that he was too big a fool to get one in the usual way. It was perhaps true, and yet somehow or other fools do get into the army. Or so it is said even by men in the service, and especially by the Sappers. There is no knowing but that he might have interviewed a sergeant if it hadn't been for Renée Buckingham, who saw him in the Row one Sunday and promptly took a fancy to him. She dropped a parasol which he picked up. Mrs. Buckingham said he was the handsomest young man she had ever seen. She saw him talking with Bigham, and she made the old soldier present the boy to her. He did it with reluctance, but she always got her way with every one. Jack forgot about the army forthwith, and fell into her train.

"Damn the woman," said the old general. "I must warn the lad against her."

It is little use warning the mouse after the cat has shaken hands with it.

"Oh, ain't she beautiful?" said Jack, when the old boy hummed and hawed and began on Mrs. Buckingham, "and so kind! I say, general, isn't her husband rather a bounder?"

"Who told you?" asked the general.

"Oh, — ah, I — I — gathered it," said Jack. He had gathered it from Mrs. Buckingham, who had lost no time in exciting his sympathy for a delicate and much misunderstood woman.

"I suppose a man who makes jam and biscuits may be a gentleman nowadays," said Bigham, "but in my time we didn't think so. It's the amount you make, Jack. If you make 'em in the bakery and put 'em in a tray, you're a tradesman. If you make 'em in tons, you're a gentleman. It's the same with bacon. A few rashers a cad sells, but a million rashers get you a title. Buckingham's father was a baker in the Commercial Row, but Buckingham has a factory and three hundred hands at least. Shops all over the place, too. But Mrs. Buckingham —"

"I'm sorry for her," said Jack. "She ought to have married a gentleman."

Old Bigham growled.

"She's done well enough for herself. Look here, my boy, mind what you're about with her."

Jack stiffened visibly.

"Why, sir?"

Bigham growled again.

"Some of these married women in town are nothing better than man-traps. I'm sorry I introduced you to her, only she made me."

If the old general had had any tact, he might have frightened Jack, though it was probably too late. As it was, Jack thought his dear new friend was being abused. It was only a fortnight since he had spoken to her, and she was already writing to him every other day, and signing herself his friend! Jack shut up with Bigham, and wouldn't dine with him next time he was asked. It was Bigham who spoke to Cassilis. He called Mrs. Buckingham a blasted cat.

Jack called on her that afternoon. She had asked him to come. "Your poor friend is sad," said the letter, which Jack put in his pocketbook with seven others in the same handwriting. He found his "poor friend" alone, dressed in half-mourning, and posed in a half-light. She looked best in that light, in spite of her determination to be a beautiful woman which had imposed on three-quarters of the world.

"I wondered if you would *care* to come," she sighed, as she gave him a really beautiful hand.

Jack stammered clumsily that he was delighted to come.

"You — you knew it, Mrs. Buckingham."

She knew it well enough.

"I had a headache all the morning and indeed till a few minutes ago," she said. "But it has gone now. Sit down by me and tell me what you have been doing all this time."

She lay back on the sofa.

"I've been thinkin'," said Jack.

"Not about me?" said Mrs. Buckingham. "I sha'n't believe you if you are sweet and say so."

"It's true," said Jack, "I was thinking a lot about you, and about your bein' so kind to me."

"Nonsense, my dear boy," said the kind woman.

"I'm not kind, it's only my selfishness because I like you. You're so different from those I know best. You have ideals, and all the rest think of is money."

She spent every penny she could wheedle and cajole and squeeze out of the biscuit merchant. Buckingham, who was sometimes bitterly humourous, said that she ate half the biscuits and all the jam that he made out of the sweat of other people's brows.

"I love people who want to do things," she sighed. "Why was I a woman? If I had been a

man, I should have tried to do something. Jack, — may I call you Jack? — I'm quite a lot older than you, you know. I'm twenty-three."

Jack was nearly twenty-one and she was twenty-seven. He blushed and stammered that she could if she liked.

"You see I always *think* of you as Jack," said Renée Buckingham, prettily, "and I shall if I like."

"Oh, please do," said Jack.

"Tell me about your father, Jack; is he as nice as you?"

Jack smiled.

"He's a splendid old chap, Mrs. Buckingham —"

Mrs. Buckingham made a mouth, and Jack stopped dead.

"What?" asked Jack.

"Oh, nothing, I'll tell you another time, Jack. Go on about your father."

"He's very clever, quite the cleverest man I know. You'd like him; you'd understand him. He's more like a chum than one's governor. I tell him everything."

"What, everything, really?"

"Well, nearly everything."

She sighed.

"I wish I had some one to tell everything to."

But go on and tell me about your mother. It was she who stopped you going into the army, wasn't it?"

Jack nodded.

"The poor old mater thought I should be killed at once. She hates to see me with a gun. She thinks I'm delicate."

Renée laughed, and Jack laughed, too.

"Why, you are quite a Hercules," she said.

Jack felt his own arm, which was like a branch of an oak.

"Oh, yes, I'm very strong."

"Let me feel your arm," said Renée, and, when he allowed her to do so, she gave a little squeak.

"Oh, dear, why you could kill me with one blow or — or a squeeze."

"Of course I could," said Jack, innocently enough, "but mother puts mustard plaster on my chest if I cough. I'm forty-four round the chest."

"I'm nineteen round the waist," said Renée. "You could almost span it. I should love your mother. But up here you have no one to take care of you."

"I'm all right," said Jack. "I like London, but I miss the exercise I get in the country. I tell you I do go about."

He looked as if he did.

"I suppose you could lift poor little me with one hand!"

"How much do you weigh?" asked Jack, eagerly.

"Eight stone," said Mrs. Buckingham. "I ought to be fatter, but life is so hard."

"Eight stone is a hundredweight, isn't it?" asked Jack. "Oh, if you were the size of a dumb-bell, I could lift you as easy as wink."

"It's quite wonderful. You could make your living as a strong man, couldn't you?"

"I suppose I could," said Jack, pensively. "I like doin' things, Mrs. Buckingham."

"My Christian name is Renée," said Mrs. Buckingham. "Do you think it a pretty name?"

"Rather!" said Jack. "It's an awfully pretty name. I never knew any one called that before."

"You said you had been thinking of me a great deal these last two days, Jack?"

"So I did."

"When you think of me, what do you call me in your mind?"

Jack stared.

"Why, Mrs. Buckingham, of course."

She made a face and half-turned away.

"That's silly when I think of you as Jack, for I seem to have known you all my life."

"Same here," said Jack, with much surprise.
"That is what I was just sayin' to myself."

"I don't believe it, for, if you felt like that, you couldn't think of me as Mrs. Buckingham. Now how do you pronounce my name?" she asked, shaking her finger at him.

"Ren-ée, Renée," said Jack, colouring a little.

"Very well, I won't be called or thought of as Mrs. Anything, if we're going to be friends, Jack."

"Then may I—may I call you Renée?" he asked, tremulously.

"I've been telling you to do so for whole long, tedious hours," said Mrs. Buckingham, with petulance.

Instead of tea, she gave him whiskey and soda. She poured out the whiskey herself with great generosity, and Jack gulped it down without knowing what it was. If it had been vitriol or herb-tea, he would have thought it nectar. Renée was a most wonderful creature, he said. She was quite different from any one he had met in the country. There was no one there so clever, unless it was Cecilia Clarendon, and she was almost always very unkind and made him feel like a fool. Renée made him feel humbly wise. Cecilia (oh, he liked her well enough when she wasn't nasty) made him feel small. She jeered at his muscles and talked

about books. Renée felt his biceps and admired them. She made him feel like a young Hercules, and as big as a gentle giant. He talked to her about hunting and shooting with a flushed face and shining eyes. Renée's eyes shone, too. Oh, what a splendid boy he was! She played with him, played on him, and flattered him grossly and yet most subtly when she spoke of herself.

Jack knew nothing of sirens of this kind, though he knew of others hardly more open. She liked him and was going to be his friend. She was the first woman who had ever desired to be his friend. She made him comfortable and happy. He was mostly silent and reserved, but now he talked rapidly and laughed.

"Ah, if I could laugh like you!" she sighed, suddenly. "You've got no real griefs, Jack!"

He stopped and his jaw fell. She looked very unhappy.

"I wish I could help you," said Jack, and she laid her hand on his.

"My dear Jack," she sighed again.

"I hate the life I lead," she said, "and I'm still young (but, oh, so old and wise). I wish I was a young and innocent girl again."

She was the daughter of a penniless captain in a line regiment, who had married an elderly gar-

rison hack, who thought only of herself. Renée's innocence when she was ten was almost equal to her mother's.

"People think I have everything I want," she cried, forlornly, "as if one's soul could live on gold dust. Jack, dear, you must be my friend, always, always!"

She sprang to her feet, and Jack stumbled to his.

"You will, you will?"

"Oh, oh, yes," said Jack.

"Then go, go, now, or I shall say things I oughtn't to say," she cried. "Don't stay another minute. Write to me. No, don't, come the day after to-morrow."

She led him to the door, and, when she reached it, she turned, took him by the lapels of his coat, and stared into his face.

"I hope I've not made you unhappy, dear boy, but sometimes I can't bear things. You help me. Oh, you are good. Jack dear, kiss my forehead."

Jack kissed her with infinite reverence, and found himself in the street half a mile away before he came to anything like himself.

"Oh, she's beautiful and kind," said poor Jack, "and I kissed her! I'll be her friend always."

But Renée Buckingham put her hand to her forehead, and then put it to her lips and kissed it

passionately. Perhaps she liked Jack then almost as well as she had ever liked any one. Down-stairs the footman who had taken up the tea and whiskey and soda spoke his mind about her.

"The missis has the hook into this new young 'un, and no mistake," he told the others in the servants' hall. "He's a dashed good-lookin' chap, and would look well in uniform. I wonder 'ow old Buck stands it. This is the second since I've been in the 'ouse."

"The old boy thinks about jam and biscuits and nothin' else," said his fellow footman.

The footman shook his head.

"You don't notice 'im look at 'er the way I do," he said. "Some of us here will be givin' evidence in the divorce court yet, if I'm the judge of women that one in my persition ought to be. I tell you, Bucky 'as his eye on her, and I've seen suspicions in that eye. Between us 'ere, the missis is a rotten wrong 'un. I can stand anything if a gal is constant to 'er foolishness, but this flightiness in affection disgusts me. When that pore young Captain Raynour went out to Nigeria, he left this 'ouse with tears in 'is eyes and as white as a ghost. 'E writes to 'er now every week. Oh, it's this young Bexley, and sure as death Raynour's eye is hout!"

CHAPTER IV.

By the time Bigham had told Cassilis, and Cassilis had written to Jack's father, nearly every one knew that Jack was dead in love with Mrs. Buckingham. There was, however, a very important exception. It was, of course, Jack himself. A less important one was Buckingham, who was engaged in turning himself into a limited liability company, with good hopes of getting a peerage by and by. "Below stairs" was wrong in one thing. Buckingham had no suspicion of his wife. He believed her utterly incapable of caring about any one but herself, and, as he knew the poverty from which he had taken her, he could not believe she would endanger her present position. She was as cold as a whole range of mountain peaks, but she loved jewels and furs and horses and motor-cars and a fine house. The biscuit-maker was, in his way, proud of her. She was supposed to be very beautiful. Indeed, at times, she was really lovely. She was often witty, and could handle a big dinner-party like a hand at cards. If they were not in the swag-

gerest set, they were in the one next to it, and her portrait was in many shops. Buckingham's great rival put some one very like her into advertisements which showed a pretty woman eating the rival biscuits and saying they were the best. Even that had its pleasant side, for, as Buckingham said, he couldn't retaliate on the other man's wife, seeing that she was as ugly as sin.

However, Buckingham was capable enough of jealousy if he really did get suspicions; for he was just fifty, and a love of fifty is furious and exigent and difficult to deal with. It must be remembered that Buckingham loved his wife, and would have sacrificed a brand of jam or biscuits to get some affection from her. But the truth is that James Buckingham was not an attractive man. He was fat and he was not witty, and he was devoted to business and to the Conservative party in spite of the Sugar Convention. He revolted in private, and voted in public as he should. Not only that, but he spoke against his own convictions and impressed this on the party whips.

"It isn't every one who would do it for you," he said, "and I hope it won't be forgotten."

It was understood that it was not to be forgotten. His contributions to the party funds were very large. His loyalty cost pretty nearly as much as

his wife did. One sees that the biscuit-maker had his mind full, even if Renée ran a bit wild, and got herself talked about with Jack Bexley.

"Lord Buckingham — Lady Buckingham," mused the manufacturer. Would any woman be fool enough to risk such a future for a whim? He told her all about it.

"Keep it dark," he said, "but it's a sure thing!"

At any rate, he had his money on it.

That was how things stood when Cassilis, K. C., wrote to Sir John Bexley. Or that is how they stood in Buckingham's mind. Up came Sir John and found the enormous King's Counsel seated in his chambers, fortified, so to speak, with briefs which had prodigious sums marked on them. Cassilis weighed eighteen stone, and knew more than law. He knew the world and every one in it. He had the appetite of a provincial leader of society for scandal and gossip. He told amazing stories, and told them like a professional. His laughter being contagious, he was forgiven for any impropriety because he always brought in something new. It was quite natural that, when on his legs in court, he was the steadiest and most accurate and most solemn of men.

"Well, Bex, my boy," said Cassilis, "I thought I'd see you. This colt of yours (damn fine lad,

Bex) is goin' very free. Old Bigham came to me, but, bless you, I'd heard about it before. All the girls that wanted Jack to gallivant are furious. They say he's divine."

Bexley shook hands and sat down.

"I suppose you're very busy?"

"Busy be damned," said Cassilis, "not when you come in once every five years. To the devil with the briefs. I suppose you want to hear about the lady?"

Bexley said that he did.

"Fascinatin' devil she is," said the King's Counsel, "and a pretty bad lot, if I'm a judge of bad lots. I don't think she's pretty, but some do. Buckingham picked her out of a Colchester gutter when he started a new shop there; father a captain, mother no one. Now she wallows in jewels and furs, and Buckingham's bein' busy tryin' to be made a peer (and he'll do it). She has her head, and no kids as ballast. Before your handsome Jack turned up, there was a young soldier hangin' round her. He went to Nigeria in time to prevent a scandal, so these damned scandal-mongerin' old women say. Your boy's with her every day, they tell me. Mrs. Wankley (you know Wankley and Gilberts) is furious about it. She's a rotter, worse, if anythin', than the Buckingham, and wanted him for herself.

Take your boy away; they tell me any woman might be excused for weakness when he's about."

"You don't think it's come to anything, do you?" asked Bexley, anxiously.

"How the devil do I know, Bex? If it hasn't it's touch and go. Why don't you marry him? I tell you these idle women in this town are a public peril to pretty boys. I think things get worse and worse. No one can say I'm a moralist, but it's pretty hot nowadays. This Renée Buckingham is just the sort. She made love to me! To me, my boy; said I was a dear darlin'. She's as bold as brass, acts like billy — oh, and some of my friends on the divorce side will be lying their immortal souls out on her behalf yet."

Bexley frowned.

"But is her reputation so bad?"

Cassilis laughed.

"Of course not. You can have fifty lovers if you don't get into court. You ought to know that. Oh, Bex, you were a devil in your time! You can't blame the lad. He's your boy. Ain't you got some pretty gal down at Charteris that you could turn on to him?"

Bexley nodded.

"I've been thinking of it. There's Tom Clarendon's daughter."

"Amazin' ass, Clarendon," said Cassilis. "He's the butt of the House, and the bore."

"His daughter's no fool, though, and she's a good girl, too. She types his stuff about drains."

"Must be a good girl," said Cassilis. "And the mother must have been clever. Let's go and have lunch. Can we find your boy and take him to feed?"

"Just what I was thinking of," said the father. "He doesn't know I'm up."

They took a four-wheeler and drove to James Street, Piccadilly.

"If you please, sir," said the servant, "Mr. Bexley has gone home, if any one called."

They drove away.

"That looks better," said Cassilis.

But Bexley shook his head.

"Either better or worse, Cass."

It was not better.

"Oh, what a scoundrel I am," said poor Jack, as he went down home. "I must never, never see her again. Poor, poor Renée!"

Bexley and Cassilis saw poor Renée lunching at the Carlton with Lady Wilhelmina Rayley, better known as Lady Billy. Renée was brilliant, her colour was fine, and her eyes were bright. She looked amazingly pleased with herself.

"That's the very woman," said Cassilis. "I think she's devilish pretty, after all."

So did Bexley.

"Who's the other?" he asked.

Cassilis told him.

"Wife of Lord Arthur Rayley, youngest son of the marquess. She's the most inexplicable damn woman in London. There's nothing that I know of against her morals, except that Arthur Rayley may have spoilt 'em with his, but she's greedy for money and never has any. She'll borrow from a beggar or rob a church, and never has a purse. The Buckingham is paying for the lunch. They call her Lady Billy, for her name's Wilhelmina. She plays bridge and mostly wins. If she loses, they say she cries when she pays, if she does pay. She owes me fifteen pounds now. Pretty woman, too, if she is thirty-five."

He told Bexley the inside history of twenty people in the restaurant, giving them away with both hands in the most generous manner.

"On my soul, I believe I know every one in London," said Cassilis, as he took in food and spouted scandal. "And what's more, I know all about 'em."

"Well, I'm glad now that I live in the country," sighed Bexley.

"I'd as soon live in jail, my boy," said Cassilis. "Now barring the fact that I weigh eighteen stone instead of twelve, I'm the same as I was when we ran round together thirty years ago, and you are much changed, Bex. It's all the beastly country."

"Bex" sighed again, and thought it might have been twenty years of Lady Bexley and respectability.

"Look here," said the King's Counsel, "let me introduce you to the man-trap and Lady Billy. We can see if she has any signs of virtue or confusion about her. They all love to talk to me. Just watch her face when I mention your name."

The ladies were three tables away, and they both smiled at Cassilis when he rolled up and roared that he was glad to see them.

"My dear friend, Sir John Bexley," said old Cassilis. Lady Billy called him "darling Cassy," which was a way of hers. The man-trap looked up swiftly at Sir John and never flinched.

"I'm so delighted to meet you," she said, smiling. "I know your son, Sir John. He's a perfect darling, and every one in town is in love with him."

"He's a good lad," replied his father.

"Oh, I adore him," said Mrs. Buckingham. "We are *great* friends. He talks a great deal about you."

Bexley didn't believe it. It was indeed a false move on the part of the lady. She ought to have known better than to tell any lie which was not needed. But she was nervous, though she didn't show it. She dreaded "darling old Cassy," who was keeping one eye on her, though he talked to Lady Billy.

"The old beast knows everything," she thought.

"There's not a better chap alive," said Bexley.

"I thought I should meet him in town, but he went back home to-day."

This was a hard crack for the lady, for she was not prepared for it.

"Oh, yes," she said, "I understood he was going home."

Bexley saw she lied, and feared the worst had already happened. Those who knew him in the old days said he was a hardened reprobate, and yet, when this kind of trap concerned his boy, he was as touchy as if that boy were a girl.

"She's hard hit herself; and she's nearly thirty," said Bexley to himself. "I'd like to wring your blasted neck, my lady."

He said polite things, was as charming as only he could be, and took her away from the subject of his son. Cool and clever as she was, she showed a little relief, for she imagined he had heard some-

thing from Cassilis, whom all the world but himself knew to be a dangerously well-informed scandal-monger. She thought Sir John amazingly handsome, as indeed he was. His white hair crisped and shone and curled; his complexion was like a boy's.

"What a darling your friend is," said Lady Billy. "Look at his beautiful, beautiful white hair, Cassy! I adore men with white hair. I could kiss his lovely darling head."

She spoke loudly, and Bexley stared and laughed. Lady Billy posed as one who said exactly what she thought with amazing simplicity. She turned to Mrs. Buckingham.

"I say just what I like, Renée, don't I?"

"Indeed you do," said Renée, "and at times I wish you didn't."

"Don't say that," laughed Bexley. "I don't get so many compliments now that I can spare one."

"I'm a perfect child still," said Lady Billy. "I say awful things, I know, don't I, Cassy?"

"You're a devil," said Cassilis, "but you never say nasty things. I've seen you think them, though."

"I wish I knew what you think," she retorted. He touched her on the raw.

"You do," said Cassilis.

Their eyes met.

"I sha'n't call you a darling again," she said, lightly.

Bexley rose.

"I hope I shall see you again, Sir John," said Mrs. Buckingham.

Sir John said that he hoped so, too.

"Mr. Cassilis, you've not been to see me for months. Come and bring Sir John very soon."

"I will," said Cassilis; "we are a splendid couple, Bex and I. We set off each other's good points."

"You *do* set off Sir John's," said Lady Billy, venomously, but with an air of innocence.

"I'll take it out of you at bridge for that," cried Cassilis.

They went off together.

"I gave her one there," said Cassilis. "What do you think of the other, Bex?"

"She's as dangerous a woman as I've seen," said Bexley.

"And the boy?"

"I'm afraid she's nailed him," said the father.

"That's what I think. She didn't know he'd gone back to Charteris, though."

"You thought not?"

"I'm sure of it," said Cassilis. "If Jack is down

in the mouth and full of remorse when you see him — ”

“ I shall be sure,” said the father.

He put his arm in Cassilis's.

“ I'm damned sorry I let his mother have her way with him for all these years, old chap.”

As soon as they were out of the restaurant, Mrs. Buckingham paid the bill, lent Lady Billy a sovereign, and went home in a hansom to see if there was a letter from Jack. She found one. It was remorseful enough in all conscience. He had ruined her life, he said, and must never see her again. She replied: “ Oh, Jack, Jack, I must see you once again! ”

She cried a little, and saw to it that the tears fell upon the paper. Nevertheless, the tears were genuine enough in their way. They *were* tears, at any rate. If she had had to write a sorrowful letter to James Buckingham, they might have come out of a water-jug.

CHAPTER V.

IF Renée Buckingham had had a confidante, — which she was too wise to indulge in, — she would have said she was deeply in love with her young lover, now moaning needlessly over her lost virtue. Renée perhaps liked Jack almost as much as she could like any one but herself, and nothing in this wide earth of many-coloured marvels would have so astonished her as to be told that she was as selfish as a fish and as chill of heart. What could any woman do more than cry? She cried at night, and that gave her twelve hours to recover the brightness of her eyes. She needed no time to sharpen her tongue if poor Jimmy gave her occasion to draw that weapon on him. However, he was deep in the matter of the peerage, and spent his time between it and biscuits and jam. He had his excitement, and she took hers. Jack in the meantime leaned against an oak and bewailed his evil nature, his lack of restraint. His mother said he was sickening of pneumonia. She knew London was bad for him. She prepared a plaster; and Jack, with

every intention of refusing it, exposed his mighty chest and endured it. He thought that the old lady would go, and that the chair might have the mustard, but the dear old thing sat by his bed and saw that the condiment to all his mighty beef got its work in.

"I say, mother, this is precious hot," said Jack, wondering, as he spoke, how odd it was that his remorse and even his passion for Renée would pass out of his thoughts on the mere application of a sinapism.

"It will do you good, my darling boy," said Lady Bexley, patting his curls and feeling very comfortable in her motherly heart. "It will do you good, and to-morrow you will thank me."

"I believe it's taking the skin off," groaned Jack, presently. He forgot all about Renée.

"Oh, no," said Lady Bexley, "I mixed it with linseed."

She had mixed it with boiling linseed truly.

"Oh, Lord!" said her wretched boy. "I say, mother, I think I could sleep if you left the room."

"No, darling," said his mother, "I do not trust your endurance. It is necessary that the plaster should make you red."

"I must be scarlet now," said Jack, who wanted to swear.

"Be courageous, darling," said the dear old lady. "I was courageous about these things at your age. Your grandmother put plasters on me very frequently. She taught me how to make them."

She prattled pleasantly of how such things were made.

"It has already taken away that gloomy feeling you had, Jack, has it not?" she asked.

"I'm not in the least gloomy now," said Jack, whistling painfully, "and I think I'm well already. But it hurts like one o'clock, mother."

"It hurts me more than it does you," returned Lady Bexley, placidly.

"Then I wish you'd try it," said Jack. He wasn't penitent at all now.

"If my having it on would do you good, I would willingly," said his mother. "A minute and a half more, dear."

She sat there with an ancient watch, and ticked off his agony.

"Now, let me take it off," she said.

But Jack was beforehand with her.

"There, I'm scarlet," he said, "like a beet."

"You've been very brave," she said, "but you always were about plasters."

"You're a brick, mummy," said Jack. "I do really feel better."

So he did. All his insurgent blood was in his skin, and when the dear old lady left him, he promptly fell asleep, and slept like a child. There is nothing like a mustard plaster for remorse.

Sir John came home late that night, and father and son did not meet till the morning. There was a letter by Jack's plate when he sat down to breakfast. He flushed and put it into his pocket.

"Come home to stay for a bit, Jack?" said Bexley, with calculated carelessness.

"Hope so, governor," replied Jack, nervously. Who could say what was in the letter?

"I'm sure London does not agree with Jack," said Lady Bexley, fondly. "He looks thin and white. Did you cough last night? and how did you sleep?"

Jack said he hadn't coughed that he knew of, and that he had slept very well indeed.

"There is nothing like a mustard plaster," said his mother. "Some people say there is nothing like pills, especially Billingtons, but your grandmother always said, 'Mustard, my dear, mustard is the thing.'"

She prattled amiably about mustard, and beamed upon Jack and his father, who had often grieved her bitterly by scorning sinapisms and rejecting linseed with loathing. It was tragic to hear her,

for Bexley's heart was heavy as a man's must be when he sees his boy for the first time facing life in ignorance.

"The chief trouble, as your grandmother always said, is that the blood will always fly to spots and set up congestions, and to draw it away to the skin prevents fatal inflammations. They used to bleed in my young days, but your grandmother always maintained that the blood was the life, as the Bible says so truly, and she stuck to mustard," prattled Lady Bexley. "Did you see your friend Cassilis, John?"

"Lunched with him, my dear," replied her husband. "He's as big as ever."

He went out and was soon followed by his son. Bexley put his arm in Jack's.

"Saw a friend of yours yesterday," said Bexley.

"Who was it, guv'nor?" asked his son.

"Mrs. Buckingham," said his father. "She was at the Carlton Restaurant. Cass introduced me."

He felt Jack quiver, and in his heart he damned Mrs. Buckingham.

"Oh, ah, yes," said Jack.

"She seemed to like you, Jack."

"I—I believe she does," said the boy.

Bexley dropped his arm.

"Don't forget, my dear boy, that all the girls

(poor dears) are of opinion that you are devilish good-looking. I suppose you are."

He stopped and looked at him critically, and Jack blushed.

"What bally rot, sir!"

"Too much beauty, my buck, is a devil of a heritage," said his handsome father, with a yawn that hid a sigh. "There was another woman with your friend, a Lady Billy something or other."

"Lady Billy Rayley," said Jack, eagerly. "She's fun."

He was glad to talk of some one else than Renée. How odd and even how terrible it was that his dad had got to know her!

"She said you were a darling, and as beautiful as Apollo and Hercules. Don't let the poor dear fall in love with you, my boy. These idle women in town, who have so little to do that they can't find time to do it, spend all they can spare from worrying about being overdriven in falling in love."

He opened the library door.

"Be on your guard with 'em, especially the Lady Billy class, Jack. By the way, I met the Mr. Buckingham years ago. He's a bit of a bounder, but a really good chap. Cass says he adores your friend, his missis."

Cassilis had said nothing of the sort. But to

hear it made Jack sick. He went away with his head down and opened Renée's letter.

"Oh, Jack, Jack, I must see you once again."

And Bexley called the lady all the bad names he could think of, while Jack swore she was an angel that he had caught with bird-lime, spoiling her heavenly roseate feathers. And poor Buckingham adored her! Though there was still a red square on Jack's chest, his remorse was bitter. He said it was his duty to see Renée and explain that he meant to be good, that he must be. He would kiss her once, and say good-bye for ever!

It could be maintained by a special pleader who ignored British morality at its very best, that Jack was as good a chap as ever breathed. But one may thank Heaven that such pleading would be lost on a jury of Mrs. Grundies, who represent the holiest elements of English life, bless them! Jack was a bad boy and very immoral. First, Molly Botfield, and then a lady whose husband was a candidate for a peerage! They might be Lord and Lady Macaroon at any moment if the ministry got in a tight place and had to appeal to jam and biscuits.

Jack wrote a letter, after he had kissed Renée's with an abandon which argued ill for his good resolutions when he kissed the writer for a young lover's last time. She had cried over that letter. One of

the Jacks and the word "must" were almost illegible with the lady's tears. Poor Jack's heart broke to think of it. He very nearly cried over the letter he wrote, just as a tutor might over the spelling. It seems impossible that the heir to an estate worth three thousand a year should have written "dearest" and "misrubble," but that is the way Jack spelt the two main themes of his letter. From these two words the tenor of it may be gathered without any more disclosure of the poor young devil's unhappi-

"I'm a scoundrel," said Jack. "I ought to be killed, but I'll go up again to-morrow and see her for the last time."

He kissed the letter once more and lifted a stern white face to the ironic gods. Then he heard his father calling him.

"I'm goin' to ride over to Clarendon's this morning," said Bexley. "I wish you'd come with me, Jack."

Jack didn't want to go. He wanted to go out in the woods and kiss that letter, in order to confirm himself in his good resolutions. However, as he had now determined to do his duty to every one henceforth and for ever, he said, "All right, sir." The old boy was a rippin' good sort! He would never bring those shining white locks with sorrow

to the family vault at Charteris Towers. He would also endure as many plasters as his mother chose to put on him. He was almost in the state of mind in which he could go to her and say: "Mother, I have a pain in my chest. Could you make me a blazing, burning mustard plaster, which I thoroughly deserve?"

If he was penitent now, how much more was his penitence when he found that, instead of his own horse being saddled for him, his father gave him Springtide. For Springtide was a horse that any horse-lover might have been proud of. He wasn't quite thoroughbred, but just the bit that he wasn't gave him the power and endurance of a fiddle-headed old mustang from the prairies of Texas. Jack knew his father had refused three hundred for him.

"He's a bit too rowdy for me, Jack," said the old boy. "I'm two stone too light for him, and that's the truth. I've been going to give him to you this long time."

It is possible that such a lie might be forgiven to any parent who foresaw that he would want all the influence he could get with a son.

"Oh, sir," said Jack. He gripped his father's hand and couldn't speak. "You are a deal too good to me."

Any one who knew less of the truth might have missed, indeed would have missed, the bitterness in Jack's voice.

Bexley sighed.

"That's all right, my boy. We can't be young always. An old chap like me has to be content that he has a son to ride the rowdy ones."

"You're not old," said Jack, indignantly.

"Sixty-one is old," replied his father. "Look at Tom Clarendon."

"And look at you," said Jack, scorning Tom Clarendon's figure. "You ain't old in the least."

"As long as I've got you, my boy, I'll be as young as you like."

Jack swore that if ever he gave "the guv'nor" a minute's uneasiness, he would be damned. He forgave him for not letting him go into the army. If he had gone into the service, he would never have met Renée.

"I — I love her, and what shall I do?" he asked himself. He believed that he adored her. Thus can youthful passion masquerade as love, even in better men than Jack.

They came to Clarendon's slowly enough, after one short gallop, in which Jack forgot her as he had done under the swift influence of mustard and linseed. Tom Clarendon saw them from afar, and

met them, waddling or rolling, and roaring prodigious welcomes.

"I'm damn glad to see you both. How are ye, John, my boy? Jack, you're lookin' splendid! No, you ain't, you're a bit pale. Been in town, eh? I get pale myself there. Gimme the country. Oh, it looks fine! Off with you, and in you come. Bless my soul, I'm glad to see you. Where's Cissy? Damn the girl, where is she?"

He rolled back to the house and roared for Cissy. Cecilia came out on the door-step, pale and gracious and dignified. Jack looked at her. His eyes had been opened to the strange beauty of women, and something deep within his foolish heart, that was yet true to the truest things, saw how sweet she was. It was sweet to see it. Something else said that here was a million times better creature than Renée. This horrible disloyalty within him made him rage against himself. He could not understand that his soul knew more than he, understanding by the soul those seeds which flower late and yet shall flower longest and adorn a man. The boy's heart was most essentially chaste, and as sound as a young oak, in spite of Molly and hothouse Renée.

A strange shyness of Cecilia took hold of him. In the shadow of the porch she appeared like a lily.

Jack, being Jack and a boy for all the growth of him, conceived that here was most blessed innocence and ignorance. He knew all things and was stained. He denied a voice that said so, for Renée was true purity and had purified him. He strove to believe it, and then the voice was quiet within him.

"Oh, Cecilia," he murmured as he alighted.

He was not pale, but flushed with his ride. His eyes were intense blue, his skin clear as a peach. In every movement there was strength and adequate grace.

"I'm glad you've come again," she said, lightly, touching him carelessly with her eyes. He desired to read nothing in them, and could have read nothing. But his father read much, for he caught the girl's eye, and could read what Cecilia scarcely cared to hide from him. She knew that the older man loved her, and understood more than any one she had known. His voice and very look were medicinal to the troubles of youth, because he understood. And, in truth, Cecilia and he had come to an understanding in the time between their last meeting and this one, as the sympathetic do. He shook hands with her and smiled. She looked at him with a daughter's eye; she was tender and devout.

"This is real intelligence," said Bexley. "This

is a woman. God, what does her father know of her? She's wise as Solomon."

They made a pact as they touched hands. They both looked at his son as he stood with the horses till a groom came to lead them away. It was an exquisite pleasure to her to know how easily Sir John comprehended everything. Yet she sighed lightly. She loved his son truly, but would he ever understand as the older man did? These are the bitternesses of life, when wisdom and innocence go hand in hand.

Then Tom Clarendon bellowed of lunch.

"Now, Cissy, now, my gal, tell 'em to hurry lunch a bit. Jack's teeth are sharp, I can see. He's never off his feed, and wants to peck after his ride. Look at him, there's the sort of boy for me; there's muscle for you, and height. Get the nose-bag ready. Last time you were here, Jack, you ate a round of beef, or was it two round, Cissy? Well, come in, come in. I've got the proofs of that article on drains, John. You shall read 'em for me after lunch. It reads rippin'ly. I'm printin' it for the Society."

He took the proofs in to lunch with him, and read them elegant extracts between huge mouthfuls. Jack's appetite was nothing to his, and when Tom

Clarendon saw that he ate little, he rallied him with the delicacy for which he was distinguished.

"Must be in love, Jack. Tell us who it is. Don't worry about it. It'll all come right. Have another slice, with lots of fat. But, as I was sayin', John, I now proceed to describe, in a passage introduced since you were here, the French methods of draining land. Listen!"

He poured forth as from a Cloaca Maxima vast floods of learning in drains.

"Cissy translated it for me," he said. "Now I go on to the German methods. Cissy translated that, too. Look at the meek little mouse, Jack. Who'd think she can speak all the languages of Europe as well as I speak English, and with the rippin'est accent? There's a gal for you. The money spent on Cissy gives good interest, better a deal than land nowadays. Listen to this passage, John. I'm givin' every one beans here, I tell you. It's real good prose, and very indignant I made 'em all when I spoke it, and the cheers, you should have heard 'em, at the Society. Show Sir John the noospaper cuttin's after grub, Ciss. Where's the printed draft o' the bill I'm introdoocing into the House?"

So lunch passed, and Jack never opened his mouth, except to put something into it. For that

matter, Sir John hardly got a word in edgewise. He was carried away in the flood of Tom's eloquence. But when the old boy was full of beef, he dragged his friend into the library.

"Let's leave the happy pair together," he said. "They're shy, but I believe it'll be all right. I've thrown out a few delicate hints to Cissy about him, sayin' how pleased I'd be. I just threw out a very dark hint that Jack loved the ground she walked on. It made her blush to the roots of her hair, and very near encouraged me to speak openly."

"The devil!" said Bexley, "I wouldn't be in a hurry, my dear chap. I'm not sure of either of 'em."

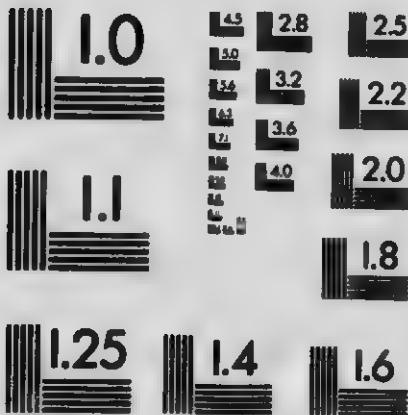
"Oh, a delicate hint spoken with tact won't do any harm," urged Tom. "I know my gal. She knows languages, but she's as meek as a linnet in a cage. I can twist her round my finger, as I could my wife, poor dear. She don't know anythin' against Jack, you know, and I'll say this, that he's the handsomest boy in the county. You kept that little affair of his very dark, I'll say that."

It was the first time that Bexley knew Clarendon was acquainted with the little affair of Molly Botfield, for the Botfields had sent Molly off and had kept their own counsel. Nevertheless, every one knew of it but Lady Bexley, though Molly by now



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was married to a gardener near Southampton, who had adopted the boy.

"Never knew you knew it," said Sir John.

"Bless your heart, I know everythin'," said Clarendon. "I don't blame the boy. These things will happen to idle lads. I think he's sound enough. Of course, Cissy would chuck him if she knew. She's very innocent and strict. I'll say nothin', only I thought I'd tell you I knew. Bless your heart, what dogs we were ourselves. Now, do you remember little Mrs. Shoosmith?"

It was his sole wicked reminiscence, and he revelled in it.

"But we're not what we were," he sighed. "Well, well, now about drains."

Bexley sighed, too.

"Don't worry Cissy about the boy, Tom, not for the present. I'm not sure of him as things go."

"Eh, what, is there any one else?" asked Tom.

"I'm not sure," replied Bexley.

"It'll disappoint me," said Tom. "'Tain't another little country girl, I hope."

"If it's any one, it's worse," said Bexley.

Tom grew anxious.

"Married woman, eh?"

"I don't know who it is, or if it's any one, only I'm a bit anxious."

"He was off his feed, I could see that. But there ain't a gal or a woman about that's a patch on Cissy. Young Lashmore is lunny about her still. However, where's those proofs? Oh, damn it, here they are."

And while Bexley corrected Clarendon's English, Jack and Cecilia were together in the garden among the roses and the flowers of June. It is true that there were not many roses or flowers, for the season had been backward. It is, however, equally true that neither Cecilia nor Jack would have noticed if the roses had been blue and the lilies vermilion. Jack was not at the age to care about flowers, and Cecilia was in love with him, to put the matter once for all on a sound footing. Flowers are good enough to weep over when the beloved one has taken his horse and ridden away.

Now these two had know² each other, more or less, since they were children, and up to the age of ten Cecilia had been his occasional slave, patient, humble, watchful of her young lord's caprices. From twelve to fifteen or, say, sixteen, she had been less humble but equally adoring, though not so open in swinging the censer. She was the faithfulest of creatures in spite of her wisdom (only discovered so far by learned, unpracticable Sir John Bexley), which indeed wondered at her foolish and

very dear faith. Jack had trodden on her, ridden her like a hobby-horse, and, with the boots and spurs of youthful male brutality, had made her bleed. At sixteen, however, he feared her and fled: an instinct told him that she might chain him up and eat him. Then she had got vicious, and, not being able to devour him as she desired, she bit him and used her wit on his hide, never so tender in a male as at the time he seems outwardly the most callous. But now, he was a man, stupid and most dear to her, a most admirable creature, adorable as any god, and hardly more vocal at times than any graven image. She was in a grove with a great wooden god, or in a temple with a silent ivory and gold Zeus. However, she made him talk at times, and now put her sword away. Her father's delicate hints had thundered in her ears like the sound of great rocks cast down. She was aware that the elders wished her to marry Jack. The baronet had said and done the right thing, as he always did when words were needed. She knew it was a matter for the young god to decide, and she understood that he was difficult. "Be a bit nice to him," said his father. The boy wasn't to be caught with hooks, or driven with blows. She sheathed her wit and kept it hidden.

"You were riding a new horse to-day," she said.

"Why, that was Springtide," cried Jack. "The guv'nor gave him to me this morning."

It was odd he spoke with melancholy. She thought so at any rate.

"How kind of him," said Cissy. "I do think, Jack, your father is one of the very nicest men I know."

Jack sighed.

"He's a rippin' good old chap, and no mistake."

What a return his son was making! It was no wonder the owner of Springtide felt gloomy. At other times Cissy would have whipped him. Now — "Be a bit nice to him, Cissy." She knew there was trouble in his mind.

"You go a great deal to London," she said, lightly enough. "Do you like it so much?"

There is a look in a man's eye that few women, even if they are fools at their own business (which is to be women), can ever misinterpret. It says more or less vaguely, "I hardly see you, hardly hear you — I see and hear another woman." So Jack's eyes spoke now. His mind fled to town to Renée, then doubtless weeping. His hand went to the pocket in which he carried the letter. If Springtide had only broken his rider's neck, what reading would have been there! Not a sign es-

caped this innocent child of nineteen, not one sign of many.

"I like it all right," said Jack. "A man must do something."

That was Jack's wisdom, maybe his only title to be a man at all.

"You still wish to be in the army?"

Jack sighed, forgot Renée for a fraction of time, and turned his eyes on Cecilia.

"Rather," said the dragoon *manqué*. "Ain't it rotten I couldn't?"

Cecilia said it was a pity, a great pity.

"If I were you, I'd do some farming," she said. "I think working the land is a really fine thing, and, if papa does give me a horrid time with his subsoils and things, I can see how a man, who really knew something about it, ought to do very well at it. Our farmers round here are so stupid, Jack."

"Asses," said Jack, "thorough asses, don't know nothin'."

"They stick in a perfect groove," said Cecilia.

"A ditch," said Jack, "never change, never use their minds. I call 'em fools. But I'd be rotten at it myself. I know I'm an ass, and they don't know they are. I ain't fit for anythin' else but a soldier, Cissy."

"I really believe you'd have made a splendid one," she said. "But if you can't be —"

"Mother squeals even now if I as much as say soldier," moaned Jack. "But she's a good old dear. She puts mustard plasters on me, Ciss."

He was much more cheerful.

"Mustard plasters! What for?" demanded Cecilia, who knew Lady Bexley to the ground, and had discussed with her the efficacy of mustard.

"Because I'm delicate in the chest," roared Jack.

"You don't look delicate in the least," said Cissy, indignantly.

"Oh, Lord," said Jack, "I'm as strong as a bull. You feel my arm."

Cecilia felt it delicately, and squeaked almost the very note that Renée had done. This brought Renée back again to Jack, and his brow clouded. However, Cecilia did not suggest that he could squeeze her to death.

"It must be fine to be so strong," she sighed, as she remembered how often she had felt Jack's growing biceps in the days of old.

"It's rot," groaned Jack.

"Oh, why?"

"What am I doin' with it? Now your brother Tom has brains, and uses 'em. And your brother Ned. I've no brains to speak of, I know, but I've

muscles, and I don't use 'em. There's somethin' wrong in everythin', Cissy. The guv'nor says so, and he's right."

"It can't be helped in this world, Jack," said the sound churchwoman.

"This is the only world I know anythin' about, or anythin' to speak of," said Jack. "I'm not religious like you."

His sins came back to him then.

"You will be some day, much more than I am."

The young sinner groaned.

"I wish I was half as good as you, Cissy. I think it's old Vokes that made me so bad with his preachin'. I was all right up to sixteen, for I never listened to the old josser; but I began to listen then, and it seemed such rot he talked."

"Poor old man," said Cissy, "he's very old, Jack, and the Church is more than one of its ministers."

"One of 'em was enough for me," replied Jack. "Tom says that, too."

"Do you see him much in town?"

Now Tom was in the Foreign Office, and was a rising man, for he was as clever as Cissy and as his mother. He and Jack mostly got on well together, for Jack admired the intellect he did not possess, and Tom, who had a poor physique, for

which he had suffered at Rugby, admired Jack as much as if he had been Porthos.

"Several times, oh, I met him last —"

He stopped, and the clouds gathered again.

"In a restaurant," he continued.

As a matter of fact, it was in Prince's, and Jack was dining with Mrs. Buckingham and Lady Billy.

"I hope you'll see him often, Jack," said Cecilia.

"I feel anxious about him in town all by himself. It's all right for you, as you are so much more able to take care of yourself."

If there was any one alive able to take care of himself, it was Tom Clarendon.

"Oh, he's all right," said Jack, gloomily. But it was pleasing that Cissy thought he was more able to look after himself than Tom.

"You're a good sort," he said, "a real good sort, Cissy."

He looked at her straight for perhaps the first time in all their talk, and he saw that she was quite beautiful.

"You're a deal better lookin' than you used to be," he said, abruptly.

She coloured a little.

"I'm glad to hear it, sir," she cried, with a pretty enough half-curtsey.

"You used to be an awful gawk three years

ago," he added, with some return to the frank criticism with which he had favoured her when he was fourteen. "And now you ain't, by any means."

Considering the circumstances, no girl in her position could hope to achieve more with a man in his position than Cecilia had done; and she positively glowed with a sense of triumph in spite of such left-handed compliments.

"If you'd like a flower as payment for that, Jack, I'll give it you."

He put a rosebud in his buttonhole with a sense of frightful disloyalty to the weeping Renée, and promptly relapsed into gloom. Whether she would have cheered him up or not, no one can say, for Sir John now came out with Mr. Clarendon. The proofs were finished in more ways than one. Cecilia had read proofs, too, and had tried her hand on correcting them.

"Here are the young things," said her father. "I hope you young things are friends. What's more delightful than to be young in a garden where roses grow?"

"We are always friends, papa, between quarrels, just as you and I are," said Cecilia. "I'll show Sir John the new strawberry bed."

Mr. Clarendon laid hold of Jack, and pointed a podgy finger at Cecilia as she led Sir John away.

"She's gettin' a damn fine gal, ain't she, my boy?"

"She is, sir," replied Jack

"There's not a cleverer, finer, or sweeter, or gentler or more domesticated woman alive," said Clarendon. "She'll make the best wife of any woman in the county. But, as her father, I'll say no more. Come and see this new drain I've cut. I'm goin' to put four-inch pipes into it."

And while Jack listened patiently to his lecture, Cecilia and Sir John walked in the kitchen-garden.

"How did you and Jack get on to-day, my dear?" he asked.

"Very well indeed; he paid me compliments," replied Cecilia.

"He's a bit heavy-handed when he does," said Sir John, "but he means what he says. There's not a spark of faiseness about him."

And presently Cecilia said:

"Do you know a Mrs. Buckingham, Sir John?"

It was not easy to astonish her companion. He always said that he never meant to be surprised till an archbishop ran away with an actress, and even then he would wait till he knew what archbis. op it was who had run away. Nevertheless, he was astounded now, and had every right to be. He

even showed it. This annoyed him greatly when he came to think over the scene afterward.

"Mrs. Buckingham, why, what do you know of her?"

Truly the matter for astonishment lay not so much in this lady as in Cecilia. How much did the girl know or suspect, and whether she suspected or knew, what difference would it make to her?

"I don't know 'em, not the new ones," said poor Sir John to himself, as he stared at her open-eyed. He meant that all his knowledge seemed vain when such a portent as Cecilia rose before him.

"What d'ye know of her, my dear?"

He replaced his mask, and Cecilia actually smiled. Sir John damned the universe. He was seen through, turned over, ticketed, sold!

"It was only that Tom spoke of her in one of my letters," replied Cecilia, quite calmly. But she knew that Sir John looked at her with scaled eyes: he was beginning to understand her more and more.

"Ah, Tom," said Bexley, "does he know her?"

Cecilia negatived this with a half-turn of her wrist.

"He saw Jack with her, that's all. I thought I'd ask if you knew her."

"I know her all right," said Bexley. "When

I was with Cassilis (you remember him), we saw her and he introduced me. She's — "

He paused.

"What?" she asked, scenting some disapproval, knowing that it was in his mind.

"She's the wife of the Biscuit Man."

"Oh," said Cecilia, "papa knows him. He wants to be a peer."

She spoke indifferently enough, but still interrogated him.

"She's rather pretty, I thought," said Bexley, not being able to allow that she was in any sense a beauty. The grudge in his voice was audible, and Cecilia knew that the woman was more than pretty.

"Did you like her?"

"I hated her," said Bexley, in a burst of confidence. "Damn the woman! I beg your pardon, Cissy."

She might have thanked him.

"I'd like to be frank with her," he thought. "They may call her nineteen, but I seem to remember that my conclusion at fifty was that no woman was less than a thousand. Cissy wants to know, of course."

If she wanted to know, it was perhaps best to say what could be said. The girl loved Jack, and

his father knew it. With such a creature, gifted with knowledge and serene with it, it was odds that whatever the childlike Jack did would be held excusable.

"She's a mother in her heart to him," said Bexley. He took Cecilia's arm.

"I'd like to speak the truth to you, my dear."

She was perfectly calm and grave.

"Not that there's anything to tell you, really," he added, hastily.

She still smiled, with her eyes on him. He dropped her arm.

"Look here, my dear, I'll be frank with you. I want you and my boy to make a match of it."

She coloured finely, but never dropped: her eyes met his, though they were a little troubled.

"I know that, Sir John."

"Damn, I hope you'll be calling me dad some day," he said.

"But —" she began.

"Don't know his own mind, my dear. I wish he was a bit uglier. Could you do with him if he was, Ciss?"

She could have done with him maimed and scarred, for it had been dear stupid, lovable old Jack with her since she could see. She smiled again for answer.

"You and I are as old as the hills," said Bexley. "Young girls are the ancientest things alive, and young boys of twenty or thereabouts, if they are healthy, are infants in arms. But they don't seem to be able to choose the arms, my dear. That's the trouble. These idle women in London are the very devil, and Jack's a fool, and, through me and his mother, he's as idle as they are. Now he's all fuss, foolishness, and highy-tighty. I daren't speak to him, or he'd fly off the handle. This Madam Jam and Biscuits seems to have him on a string. Or I fear so."

She feared so, too, but this put it plainer, and she paled a little.

"The — the wretch," she said, under her voice. She was still young enough to be hard and bitter on sinners.

"Look here, I know nothing," said the father, "and he's all I've got (except you, my dear, for I believe you love me), and I want you to watch with me and be patient. If I know anything (and you make me think I know a little), I think you've the faithfulest heart, and I'm sure you've got brains, and I believe you can see how hard it is for such as my Jack not to be a fool and be fooled."

He broke off, and she pressed his arm.

"If he is, you'll forgive him in time, Cissy? It's

hard to know any one, but I'll say this, — I believe he loves you without knowing it."

She sighed a little and murmured something.

"Oh, no, — but I *could* forgive him anything."

"You're a dear," said Bexley. "Where did you learn what you know, Ciss, out of your wise heart or books?"

"I read very little," said Cecilia.

Her knowledge, then, came out of her heart.

"My dear, if your father and Jack weren't coming here straight, I'd take you in my arms and kiss you," said Sir John.

Old Tom Clarendon came up to them, and the first thing they heard him say was:

"You stick to clinkers and broken bricks."

"What the devil?" asked Sir John.

But Cecilia smiled on Jack and said:

"Oh, papa, there's a dear, don't!"

She reverted to nineteen.

"They're all a million," said Sir John to himself.

CHAPTER VI.

JACK went back to London the next day. He said that he was going to fetch his things from town. It was not a lie, for he really meant it. But his father had much more than a suspicion that they would not see the boy again for some time.

"I should be glad to have you with us this summer," said Sir John, not without a touch of mournfulness.

"This summer?" Jack cried, in such a way as to show his faith. "What rot, guv'nor."

It was "rot" in one sense, for next day Jack was saying that the poor dear old guv'nor didn't really expect him back. By this time he had seen Renée in a half-light and a soft pink gown and tears which became her. It must be said for Mrs. Buckingham that she could cry like any artist who has her lachrymal glands under strict command. She never swelled up or got her nose red when she sobbed.

Indeed, she rarely found it necessary to sob, a tear rolling down her cheek was all that was wanted.

As it had been with Captain Raynour (or possibly some others), so it was with Jack.

"I'm so wretched," she whispered. "Oh, Jack, you — you left me!"

"Oh, Renée," said Jack, on his knees.

"I've cried ever since."

A tear dropped, and another. In that soft rain Jack's resolutions melted like sugar or salt.

"Oh, Renée," said the poor boy, with tears in his own eyes.

"I'm so unhappy, — you are all I've got left."

She meant it, for Raynour was in Nigeria, and the Biscuit Man (poor devil) was in Parliament, looking for his peerage, or in his counting-house counting out his money with an eye on the necessities of Park Lane.

"I — I — love you," said the boy.

He was not sure of it, or, at any rate, he hadn't been sure till he got into the deadly light, which is two-thirds of seduction every time. He was a fool, but at the back of his brain lay some of the wisdom of man, and perhaps not a little of the wisdom of his father, and he knew (without knowing it) that this had been an easy apple. That is the truth of it, and something told him that she didn't suffer, though her tears and words said she did.

"Oh, oh, now you despise me," she said. "Oh, Jack!"

When she said, "Oh, Jack!" he believed her every word, and believed that he loved her.

"My darling," he said, timidly.

"Oh, Jack, am I?"

"Yes, yes."

"Then I'm happy, and I don't care! I'm happy, oh, Jack!"

She loved him enough to lose her cleverness, and her talk was as silly as a servant girl's. She used the wisdom of the flesh rather than that of the heart, though the folks said not untruly that she was clever enough with her tongue and not without wit. At the back of her mind there was a savage primitive sneer at the poor peerage hunter. Up to now Buckingham had never been jealous, and this she had resented with peculiar bitterness. There are some who resent a man's trust, and they are apt to distrust his faith. Renée hungered for the flattery of jealousy: she wished to disturb the sensual mind of any man she knew.

Yet, in spite of her folly, she never gave any one her real deep thoughts. She was a creature of infinite cold reserve. She did not propose to make a fool of herself according to her own definition

of it. She claimed all the liberty in the world, as long as the world did not know.

"We — we must run away," said Jack, feeling that it was necessary if he was necessary to her. But he thought of his mother with a sinking heart. Renée, who had as much idea of leaving Park Lane and fifty thousand a year, with a possible and even probable peerage, as she had of cutting her head off, smiled sadly.

"I can't, I can't," she said, with an acted wildness that was not wholly acted. She tried to get every sensation possible out of this or any other affair. "It would ruin — him!"

If there was a ghastly scandal, it was not likely that Jimmy Buckingham would get that peerage.

"I can't do that, though I am so wicked," she moaned. It was so amazing a relief to her young lover to hear this that she saw it and was furious.

"Get away, you don't really love me," she said.

"I do," said Jack.

"Oh, say you do again," she cried, relenting. She started a little. "Get up and sit over there. They are bringing tea."

They brought it.

"You may come and kiss me once," said Renée. And ten minutes later Lady Billy came in.

"I'm glad you didn't come before," said Renée,

with an air of coolness which horrified the boy. "Jack and I have been quarrelling furiously, because he — tell her why, Jack."

Jack stammered that he didn't know that they had quarrelled.

"Tut, tut," said Mrs. Buckingham. "Why is it that a man don't know when a woman is quarrelling? You don't like me half enough. Does he, Billy?"

Lady Billy knew, or thought she knew, how matters stood.

"I can see he really hates you," she said. "You must be kind to my poor Renée, Mr. Bexley."

Jack was in what he would have described as a "perfect bally stew." Renée seemed a million miles away from him, and as for Lady Billy — Oh, her eyes were as keen as a hawk's.

"I — I don't know what you mean," he said. He made an effort. "Oh, what rot, I say. Why, I like you very much, Mrs. Buckingham."

"And me?" asked Lady Billy, laughing.

He recovered.

"Oh, you're a darlin'," he said, with something like a most becoming insolence. At any rate, he was not afraid of Lady Billy, though she was perhaps the one person of whom he ought to be afraid.

"You're the sweetest boy I know," she said,

"and, as I've made it up with my husband, you shall dine with us to-night somewhere in town. I told him I'd dine with him anywhere but at home if I might bring some one. You and Renée shall come. Can you, dear?"

"I can't, but I will," said Renée. "Where is it, and when?"

"At the Café Royal at eight," said Lady Billy.

Some one else came in, and Jack took his departure with his head in a whirl. He sent a telegram to his father and said he was detained.

"Damn her," said Sir John.

Lady Billy outsat the newcomer, for she had come with a purpose.

"I want you to lend me ten pounds, darling," said she.

Renée made an ugly mouth out of a pretty one, and reached for a book on her writing-desk.

"You owe me two hundred and twenty already, Billy."

"I'll get it out of Arthur this week."

"Pooh!" said Renée, "you know he hasn't a cent."

"He will have."

"How?"

"His father."

"That's much too thin," replied Renée. "He's

not got half a cent. However, I'll lend it you this once."

"You're a dear," said Lady Billy. "I think the way I'm kept for money is perfectly horrid. For all Arthur cares, I might steal enough to pay for my clothes."

"You don't pay for 'em, darling," said Renée, who knew she acted as tout for a tailor, and was paid in kind, and wrote for an illustrated paper about frocks and millinery. She never recommended anything until it 'ad been sent home for her to review, as she called it.

"I pay in time and trouble," said Lady Billy, a little tartly, "and no one knows but you. I know things about you, and you know some about me."

"You *know* nothing about me, Billy. Now do you?"

"I wish you could make it twenty, darling, I'm in an awful fix," said Billy, sighing.

"Now do you?" insisted Renée.

"Not a thing, dearest, and, if I did, I love you."

"You shall have twenty this time," said Renée.

"I know very little about you, Billy, and, for all I know, you're a millionaire."

"I wish I was," said Lady Billy, as she kissed her and went.

"Poor old Raynour," said Billy. As she walked

down toward Hyde Park Corner (she had no carriage, and never took a cab if she could help it), she opened her purse and counted six ten-pound notes and seven five-pound ones. With what gold she had, her cash amounted to ninety-nine pounds. There was a little silver over.

"I've done very well this month so far," said Lady Billy, greedily. "I wish I'd asked Renée for thirty. I believe she'd have given it me to-day."

She spent a penny on a 'bus to Knightbridge. She lived in Wilton Crescent in a house belonging to her husband. It was almost the last bit of property he had that was not mortgaged. This was due to the fact that it was only his for life, for Lord Arthur Rayley lived by his wits, by betting, begging, borrowing, combined, so some said, with a little polite blackmailing and some cheating at cards. Nevertheless, he was not unpopular. He was little, red-faced, pot-bellied, full of talk, and on occasion very amusing. He posed as an ancient aristocrat, and despised trade, since he could no longer borrow from a tailor, and had not sufficient capital left to set Lady Billy up as a milliner. She hoodwinked him completely. He believed she never had a penny unless she got it from her noble father, who was chronically hard up, but very good to his youngest daughter at other people's expense.

"Art, Mrs. Buckingham and young Bexley are going to dine with us at the Café Royal," she said when she got home.

"Then, by God, you must pay," returned Art. "I've no more than will serve the two of us."

"Then you'd better go out and pawn your watch," replied Lady Billy, calmly. "They'll very likely come in and play bridge. Where is your watch?"

"Gone up the spout, like the celebrated legend of the sparrow, my duck," said Arthur, whistling. "I anticipate every wish of yours, my darlin'. I'll pay if you'll make 'em come in. By means of bridge, I may get over the waters of suicide. Is she runnin' the young 'un very hard, old girl? Why, what a vicious little devil she is. I'd like to sell old Buck some information, on my soul. If he paid in jam and biscuits, we shouldn't starve for years. I'll think of it."

Lady Billy snorted.

"The affair is perfectly innocent. Jack Bexley's the greenest and sweetest young fool I ever met."

"Borrowed anythin' of him yet?" asked Arthur, with his legs wide apart. "Can I do a touch, d'ye think?"

Lady Billy threw up her head.

"You are such a beast, Art, are you not?" she

asked, bitterly. "You keep me without money, and try to ruin me with every one I know. If you've pawned that watch, give me a couple of sovereigns at once. I must have a pair of new shoes to-morrow, and I can't get them for nothing."

"Your feet were as good as your figure, you could," said her husband. "I'll give you a sov to be nice to-night."

"All right," said his wife. "Give it to me now."

He grunted and handed it to her.

"That makes just over the hundred," said Lady Billy to herself, and she became amazingly amiable.

"By God, you're a rum 'un," said Art. "There's no way to make you smile but to give you cash down. If you had a chance, you'd be a miser, Billy."

She flushed and turned away.

"I wish I had the chance of it. If it weren't for what I make by writing, we should be in the work-house."

"All you earn by writing is your own," said Arthur, generously. "I read one of your things the other day. It was rot, but good rot of the kind, Billy. There seems a devil of a lot to say about frocks, but you come up smilin' every time, I must say. But it's damned hard lines that an earl's daughter should be doin' it."

"Earls' daughters and some marquesses' sons are doing worse," retorted Billy.

"You don't say so," cried her husband. "Well, I think I'll make myself beautiful."

And when he left her, she took out her purse again and counted what was in it. It was a hundred pounds and seventeen shillings. She locked up the hundred and kept the shillings.

At the dinner, Lord Arthur "did" himself and his guests very well indeed. And, knowing how things stood between Mrs. Buckingham and the boy (for he felt he did know in spite of what his wife said), he did not monopolize her, but at times talked more particularly with his wife. He drank pretty hard, and got redder and redder in the face as the evening went on.

"Now you are not to tell any horrible stories," said Billy in his ear.

"Why not? Won't the dear soul stand 'em?"

"It's not that; it's he won't," replied his wife.

"Oh, I tumble," said the aristocrat. "Right you are. Wouldn't shock such pearly innocence for worlds. It's against my principles, ducky."

At the end of the dinner, it wasn't Lord Arthur who shocked Jack. It was Lady Billy. Her husband looked at the bill casually and passed it over to her.

"Tot it up, Billy; you're good at figures," said he.

The waiter brought back the change and was instantly seized on by the man at the next table, so that he did not see what tip Lord Arthur left for him. It was half a sovereign, as Jack saw. He also saw that Lady Billy picked up the coin like a conjurer and substituted two half-crowns for it. She did it so rapidly and so cleverly that Jack hardly believed his eyes. He flushed crimson to think of it. Lord Arthur also flushed crimson at the way the waiter hustled him into his coat, and left it sticking about his ears.

"I suppose the fellow wanted a sov," he said; when he was half-way out. "It'll soon come to payin' the waiter and givin' the poor proprietor a tip. I won't come to this shop again; damn insolence! If womenfolk hadn't been with us, I'd ha' slammed that waiter into the middle of next century. Did you see the way he served me, Billy? And I gave him half a thick 'un, too!"

Yes, Lady Billy had seen it.

"I wouldn't have given him half as much," said Lady Billy.

"Trust you!" cried her husband, crossly.

But Jack wondered about it all the rest of the evening, and still thought of it when his *chère amie*

dropped him at Hyde Park Corner, though he had lost ten pounds to Lord Arthur.

"Is she well off, dearest?" asked Jack.

"Dearest" said that they were beggars, poor things.

And the "beggars" divided the ten pounds between them, though Rayley tried to fob Billy off with ten shillings less, on the ground that he had given her a sovereign earlier in the evening.

"Play fair, Art," said his wife. "That was for me to be nice to you. If you don't keep to our rule, I won't play again."

"Oh, all right," grunted Rayley, "but that ain't nice."

"It's nice enough," retorted Billy.

CHAPTER VII.

A GOOD deal could be said if it were necessary, admirable, or moral, upon the subject of "Oh, Jack" and "Dearest." But, as it happens that Jack's history in its more interesting parts deals rather with the results of the intrigue than the intrigue itself, a great deal may and must be left to the imagination. Jack was Renée's lover; she was his mistress. Her husband made more jam and much progress toward the title which was to reward his efforts as a manufacturer who advertised pure sugar and used German glucose, and Lady Billy borrowed money from Renée, and owed it to Jack. Arthur Rayley wondered if there might be a little money in the affair some day, and Captain Raynour wrote pathetic letters from Lokoja or some dismal swamp in which he was an imperial slave. Sir John Bexley held his tongue and waited, for he understood the nature of young mankind, as he was one of those very rare men who have been young and foolish themselves. Lady Bexley moaned at Jack's absence, and sent him flan-

nel shirts, hewed from a kind of stuff which would have made an ordinarily enduring monument of marble break out into a rash. Jack wrote and said he wore them. He lied of course, and, if he and Cecilia had spoken about the matter (she was a good housekeeper, and understood that flannel was an insanitary outrage, not in place anywhere but in a housemaid's pail), she would have applauded his want of truth, for she loved big Lady Bexley dearly.

But the truth is that Cecilia saw very little of Jack, and being, as her father said, so young and innocent, she ought not to have known anything whatever about him and his doings. If poor Cecilia was so wicked and so unlucky as to find out anything about Jack, she ought to have rooted his image from her heart, and his photograph from her most secret drawer. She should have devoted herself, body and mind, to drains and housekeeping and her father, while she grew pale and thin with prayers for Jack's reformation and redemption. She did her duty in the matter of drains, superintended the house and her father, and grew a little pale. It was not with prayers, though indeed the poor girl prayed not a little for her erring knight who was at an alien shrine. It was simply because she loved him and was unhappy, and had no in-

tention whatsoever of giving him up in spite of his sins. There was something very wrong with her: she was a human being, in spite of being a young unmarried girl of nineteen. The only one who knew anything about Cecilia's heart was Sir John Bexley. He knew it by intuition, and because he kept his eyes open, and understood that the obvious deductions from the conduct of a girl like this were certain to be wrong. She was the only woman (for she was one) that he took any interest in. Their last conversation on the Jack and Renée subject seemed more and more wonderful to him. This was faithfulness indeed, and with a vengeance. She was faithful to the real, the inner Jack, while he went gallivanting. It would have been noble (if it had not been perhaps necessary) in a wife, but in Cecilia it was heavenly and divine, a strange celestial phenomenon rarely seen in these terrestrial skies. If some had known of it, they would have held up their spotless hands. Sir John said:

"By God, she's a woman, this girl. Oh, Jack, you fool! You'll lose her yet! But she'll take you in spite of it, and save you."

He apostrophized the absent fool, and wished he dared write to him. But it couldn't be. At Jack's age these diseases took hold. There was

no knowing what might happen if Jack flew out madly. The thing was to break up the intrigue, if it could be done, or to wait with what calmness one could for its natural termination. That termination was even now in the seed, though neither he nor Cecilia guessed, or could have guessed, how it would come about. But Cecilia knew as much as he did, and perhaps more, for one of the Amelias who had fallen in the hands of one of Cissy's rejected ones loved her dearly, and knew how things stood in her mind, though there had been never a word between them on the subject of Jack. This one of the Amelias lived in London now and went out a good deal, and, having a pure and unsatiated love of gossip and scandal proper to any young matron who must learn the ways of the world to arm her own chickens against the wringers of virgin throats, she learnt a good deal about Jack and the nice little scandal which made him out to be exceptionally dear to that lover of manly beauty, Mrs. Buckingham.

"I oughtn't to speak of it to you, as you are unmarried," wrote this Amelia, who was bursting to relate it to all and sundry, "but then you were always very different from most girls. We *both* were, of course, and George always said so. It's a dreadful thing to say, and it's more dreadful that

we have to meet her, knowing what we know, but George says we can't throw these things in people's faces unless they are proved. We had to dine there, as George had some business with Mr. Buckingham (poor man), and so I had to be polite. I expected to find Jack there, but he didn't come. It *may* be untrue, but, if it had been, wouldn't he have come? You always liked him, and so did I, but now, oh, dear, how dreadful it is. They say, too, that there was *another*, a captain in Africa, a very handsome man, too. It would be dreadful if there was a *divorce*. It would kill dear old Lady Bexley, the poor dear old thing, for then Jack would marry her. I oughtn't to tell you, and I hope you'll destroy this letter *at once*, but I felt I ought to, that it was my *duty*."

One of the Amelias made poor Cecilia about as unhappy as any girl could be. But she did not cry. She prayed rather more than usual for Jack's delivery from all wiles and sorceries of this enchantress. She longed to see Mrs. Buckingham, thinking that a sight of her might explain so awful a creature.

"Oh, yes, there *are* devils," said Cecilia, as she burnt Amelia's letter. "I'm ashamed that I love him. But it isn't his fault. Oh, I could kill her!"

She went on with her duties all the same. But

she answered the letter, saying that "it was very sad and horrible and that it was probably untrue. Of course there were bad women, every one had to know that sooner or later, but Jack was only a boy, and any woman knew that a boy like Jack wasn't responsible when a devil got hold of him. If anything happens, you might let me know, dear. I'm not a fool, and I might help Lady Bexley if there was any trouble. I believe she loves me, and I'm very fond of her, as we all were."

Amelia replied that she would tell her dear darling everything, though she knew she oughtn't to, as Cecilia wasn't married yet. If she had been able to tell her what Cassilis knew or began to suspect, she might have eased Cecilia's mind. And yet she might not, for things were coming to an odd pass with Jack and Renée and some others.

Cassilis, of course, knew a great deal more than any one else. His imagination was apt to run away with him at times, for he was given to constructing logical results from the facts, mingled with fancies, that he did know, but now he was not far wrong. It must be said for him that, as he was and always had been devoted to Sir John Bexley, he kept his tongue rather quieter than usual, and did not talk a quarter of the scandal about Jack and Renée that some others did. But he began to suspect that the

boy had deep suspicions in his mind that the lady was not all he had imagined her. He went down to Charteris one Saturday to tell Sir John so, and, staying over to Monday, he went to Ashwood and saw Cecilia, with whom he promptly fell in love. He had only known Tom Clarendon very slightly; but for Cecilia's sake he endured the old boy, as he indulged in all his hobbies connected with the soil.

"That's a clever girl, Bex," he told his friend. "She's a ripper. I don't think I ever met a girl of her age with such wits. The mother must have been a wonder."

"She was a very fine creature," said Sir John, "and she ruled old Tom with steel and velvet. I hope Cissy will rule Jack in the same way. But you really think Jack is tiring of Messalina?"

"That's her name," said Cassilis, "or Faustina. I think he sees cracks in her, sees that the paint is off, so to speak. When he came to dinner with me. I gave him such a dose of scandal, — such a dose."

"Not about her surely!"

Cassilis looked at him.

"Now am I a fool? I put it to you straight, Bex."

"Bex" said he thought not.

"Very good of you," said Cassilis, "and I'm much obliged. No, I told him all I suspected about her, and said it was about a lady whom we agreed to call Smith. I said Mrs. Smith was beautiful and essentially vicious. I pointed out to him that there were a few of that kind, and they were mostly damned idlers. I said she got rid of one lover to take another, and that to my certain knowledge I knew she had two at once."

Bexley stared at him.

"Did you mean that?" he asked.

"I suspected it when the soldier chap Raynour was here. The other's dead now, and we'll leave him alone. But I really believe she was fond of Raynour. I do really, Bex."

"Damn her, let her be fond of any one but my boy," said Bexley, crossly. "She ought to be corked up in an asylum."

"Some ought," Cassilis agreed. "I could name half a dozen that cold douches and stone cells would do a heap of good to. But I touched him on the raw with my Mrs. Smith, I could see that. I painted that languorous lily to the life, touched her off like Sargent, I can tell you. I could see he was uneasy. If he'd been quite calm over it, I should have reckoned he was still of perfect faith. But, Bex, he's not half the ass you think. He's got

good instincts in him; that's three-quarters of the battle. We who have the brains are the men to come irretrievable muckers. I wish I knew why. I wonder where Jack and the lady meet, that's what I wonder. I told him that wicked Mrs. Smith had a villa at Maidenhead, where the deluded ones went to see her. He flushed at that. I've got eyes. I'd like to have her watched."

"Oh, leave it alone," said Bexley, crossly. "If he was only a reasonable chap! But now he's as nervous as a cat. I can't speak to him."

Cassilis agreed that it wouldn't pay yet. But he encouraged him all the same.

"Even if it came out, — I mean if Buckingham found it out on the quiet, — I believe he'd sit still!"

"You don't say so, really!"

"Don't I, my boy? That confounded peerage of his! Think of it! would he make a scandal and lose it? Trust Mr. Jam and Pickles — no, Jam and Biscuits. He'd sit tight till he was in the Upper House, at any rate."

It was good to hear that view, and sometimes Bexley had thought of the same thing. Cassilis clapped him on the back.

"Buck up, we'll have peace by and by! There's things will happen, 't, if Jam doesn't boil over; Jack will get sick of her, and your Cissy will be

like a flower to him, a real flower after scented artificials. I'll come to the weddin' and take drainage Tommy off your hands. He'll make a speech at the weddin' about subsoils. What are subsoils, by the way? What a thundering old duffer he is. You should hear him in the House! No one does, though, but the Speaker and the clerks."

He went up to town on Monday, having renewed his slight acquaintance with Lady Bexley, who said she found him a most delightful man, devoted to the Church, and an authority on all points of ritual and discipline. So he was, for the time being, as he was busy in some long-winded ecclesiastical case.

"He talked to me exactly like the dear bishop," said Lady Bexley. "He has the true religious mind, John."

"Yes," said John, absently, "most of 'em can tell good stories."

"Oh, ah!" said Lady Bexley, "I don't understand what you mean, John."

"He thinks a great deal of Jack," said her husband, hastily.

Lady Bexley's face softened.

"So he does," she said. "He wears flannel himself. I told him where he could still buy the real old-fashioned kind, and he wrote the address down. I thought him very simple and kindly. But

I do wish Jack would come home. I do wish it."

Jack was a deal nearer coming home than even Cassilis suspected. And yet he didn't know it himself, as he waited for Renée in a prettily furnished flat, which no one knew he had anything to do with.

CHAPTER VIII.

No. 63 Woodley Gardens was not very far from Victoria Station, and one came to it through a very quiet street. When Jack first saw it, he thought it was lovely, but not half, nor a quarter, nor a thousandth part so lovely as she who met him there by appointment and gave him a strange surprise.

"I want you to-morrow to come and see me at this address," she had said. "The flat belongs to a Mrs. Simpson. I'll tell you about it then," and she gave him an envelope with an address written on it.

He always did exactly as he was told, and so far was an ideal lover. But there were times when Renée Buckingham thought him a little dull, even if he was so beautiful, when she wanted to let herself go. She wished that he knew her better. And yet, if she ever did let him see what she was, she felt assured that he would leave her then and there. His innocence piqued and pleased, piqued and annoyed her. She played to him always, and sometimes would have loved to take off her mask, wipe

away the paint, dry up her shining tears, and dance a damnable cancan before his eyes. There had been one who knew her utterly, knew her worthlessness, her rotten mind, her instincts of the garrison and the slum, where she had been bred and born. And yet he had loved her. If his letters bore any witness, he loved her yet with passion that no knowledge could kill or blunt. She answered George Raynour's letters every mail, and at times even finished her replies with Jack in the room. This was her nature. It gave her exceeding delight to act like that. It had given her an atrocious and malign pleasure to introduce Jack to her husband. It had been most piquant to know that Jack was wretched at meeting him, and would rather have lost a hand than taken his. There was something even more pleasurable to her in having a flat of which no one knew but herself, for, as any one who had even the slightest inkling of her real nature might have known, Mrs. Simpson was no one at all if she was not Renée Buckingham. But any deception pleased her acutely; it gave her the one great intellectual gratification of which she was capable.

"It's a sweet place, dear Jack," she said when she met him there, "and most delightfully furnished, is it not?"

The drugged and passionate boy said that nothing in it was really beautiful but herself.

"Oh, be good and listen," she cried. "Poor Mrs. Simpson, oh, I was so sorry for her. She used to live here, and she adored it. But her husband (such a hateful man) made her join him in India, where she is always ill, and I said I'd keep it for her and let it if I could. But I got into the habit of coming here when I was unhappy and wanted to be alone, and I *couldn't* let it, Jack. Now I'll let it to you, and sometimes, perhaps, I'll come and see you here. Tell me you love me."

"I — I — do," said Jack. "But I must pay you the rent, Renée."

"Owe it to me, dearest."

The one thing she was not mean about was Jimmy Buckingham's money.

"No, I'll not take it. You shall spend it on me in any way you like. When I come next time, you must have some flowers."

"When will you come?" he implored.

"Next month," she said, lightly. "Oh, no, next week. Say you want me to-morrow."

He did say it.

"You dearest thing! I'll come to-morrow to tea," said "Mrs. Simpson."

She came to tea three times a week, and, though

Jack kept his own rooms, he really stayed in the flat, only sleeping occasionally in James Street. He lived in an atmosphere of drugs, in the hot-house air of the carnivorous plants to which his mistress belonged. She mesmerized him by all the arts of the flesh, and the whole of the time her mind was double, and he played more parts than he suspected. There were, it seemed, some secrets in the flat. There was a locked cupboard in the passage; there were locked drawers in the large bedroom, which was the most luxurious part of the house. In the sitting-room there was a big bookcase, the under part of which was made of cupboards. One of these was locked also.

"I don't know what is in any of them," said Renée. "Ethel (Mrs. Simpson, you know) has her things in them. But all the rest is yours."

The locked places did not trouble him; he believed what she said. When she was with him, she drowned all the native and natural beauty of his mind and heart. He suspected nothing of her nature when she touched him; when she kissed him, he surrendered and was her slave. Only at nights and at the times of the day when he was alone, there came moments when she seemed less and more than a woman. He choked the thoughts down and deemed them damnable. He wondered how and

why the inward nature of a man said such things. The voice (which was by no means the voice of conscience) said that she was selfish, cruel, fleshly, and wicked, and what it said was truth. He was soon to see that it was truth indeed.

It was then the middle of July, and an off day with Renée, who was dining with Jimmy Buckingham at the Chief Whip's house.

And thus it was that Jack was alone. He had lunched that day with young Tom Clarendon of the Foreign Office, who found Jack a sufficiently good listener. Jack thought Tom was rather a bore, it is true, but he wasn't quite so big a bore as his father, and had other subjects besides drains. He told Jack all about the Secretary of State, to whom he was absolutely essential. This was perhaps true, as even Secretaries of State are sometimes fools.

"I'm the only man in the office with a real memory," said Tom. "When they are in difficulties, they drift in to me and I put 'em right. I've the most extraordinary memory, Jack. I can repeat a whole long minute if I read it once."

"Cecilia has a good memory," said Jack, sighing.

"Oh, Ciss, yes, for a girl," said Cecilia's brother,

airily, "but nothing like mine. Lord Graydon said —"

He repeated what Lord Graydon said in Graydon's own prose, and then repeated what he said to Graydon. Graydon had replied that Tom Clarendon would go far with his gifts.

"I wrote him up a speech when his private secretary was too ill to do it," said Tom. "It was a beautiful speech, too. I'll repeat it to you."

It took the burning of a long cigar to do it in, but Tom triumphed over time, while Jack leant back and wondered how Cecilia was. She was a very nice girl. A piece of hot cigar fell on Jack's hand, and he jumped in the right place.

"I thought the peroration would fetch you," said Tom, in great delight. "I'll send you a copy of it."

"I'd like it," said Jack, "but now I think I must go."

"Will you dine with me to-night? I'll show you a paper I'm working on for Graydon. He'll get the credit of it, but it's turn and turn about, you know. Some day I'll pick a clever chap to do my work. Will you come?"

Jack said he was dining with Cassilis and old Bigham at the Carlton, and couldn't, but that he'd like to do so some other day.

"Well, next week, then. I'll have the paper finished."

If Jack was an ass, he was not so much of one as to fix a date.

"He's almost as bad as the old chap," said Jack. And after all, the old boy was mitigated by Cecilia. She was a nice girl. Oh, yes —

Jack mooned away the afternoon and wished it was the morrow, for then Renée was coming to tea. He was in a fair way to go to the devil. She drained his mind of the old aching desire for work. He could pass the Horse Guards now without tears in his mind. He did not envy Ned Clarendon ruling a small empire with two men and a boy and the toe of his boot. He thought only of Renée's white arms as a man may think of morphia, or of drink, or of some other form of damnation.

His nerves for the first time in his life were not what they should have been. He had what more experienced people call the "jumps," and anything touched him on the raw. Old Bigham did it that very evening when Jack dined with the general and Cassilis. The two elder men met there before Jack came in, and Bigham began about Renée Buckingham.

"I introduced the lad to her. She's a bad 'un, a fair bad 'un, blast her!" cried Bigham. "I'm

sorry I did. I wish she was on the street. It's all she's fit for. Folks say that it was tolerably hot in Simla, but, oh, Lord, London is the place! Is it a sure thing she has hold of him, Cassilis?"

Cassilis was fairly discreet, and said he thought not.

"Don't you tell me, sir," whispered Bigham, in a kind of penetrating roar. "I know better. Old Buck, for all he's a snob, deserved better than that cat. Jack's her lover. Well, well, I hope she won't run him to the devil as she did poor Raynour. That was a fine chap, Cassilis, a fine, handsome chap, and doin' well. He had to go to that hole, Nigeria, and he'll die there. She has her eye on handsome chaps. We're not young now, old boy!"

He sighed, and Jack came in. At dinner Bigham drank his whack. His whack was sufficient to make him rather more than less drunk, and when he was drunk he abused the War Office.

"Speak a bit lower," said Cassilis, "there's your enemy, the secretary for war, at the next table but one."

"Let him hear my opinion, sir," said Bigham, loudly. "I offered my services, old as I was, and I was received with contumely, with contempt! I was thrown into the street. There are no gentlemen at the War Office now. They don't know a

man when they see him, or a soldier. A young civilian as good as told me I was too old. I lost my temper; I shook my fist at him; I told him what I thought of him, and I wrote to the *Times* and scorched them! Let the fool hear me, even if he isn't the man who did it. I'm independent of them."

He turned to Jack.

"My boy, you're well out of it. A soldier's life is a dog's life in this country, with a lot of Jack Snipes of civilians rulin' everything. You stick to the land and avoid havin' anythin' to do with 'em. Follow old Cass even, and be a lawyer before that. Bah!"

"Cheer up," said Cassilis, who was quite delighted to see the old boy enjoy himself.

"Never mind, general," cried Jack, "we know a good soldier if they don't."

"You can read my record," snorted Bigham. "Oh, I'm all right, damn 'em! I've done my work, and they can't do theirs. What are you doin' with yourself now, Jack? Seen your father lately?"

"Not just the last week or two, general," replied Jack.

"You should. He's a good father to you. Don't run round in this Babylon, my boy. I was sayin' to Cass just now that it was a rotten place, as rot-

ten as the War Office. I say, Cass, I could do my share of another bottle. Seen that Mrs. Buckingham lately, Jack?"

Jack coloured a little.

"I saw her a day or two ago, sir."

Bigham touched him on the arm.

"She's a —"

Cassilis interposed.

"Bigham, old boy!"

He tried to catch the red-faced general's wild and wandering eye. But the outside world was rather fuzzy to the general, and he saw nothing.

"You let me speak, Cass. I'm as good as a father to Jack. I'm sorry I introduced you to that — lady, Jack. Mind what you're up to. She's a vampire, and if the truth has to be told —"

Cassilis kicked him under the table.

"Damn it, you kicked me, Cass!" complained Bigham. "I wish you'd keep your hoofs the other side. As I was sayin', Jack (hic), she's a vampire, and I could tell you about —"

Cassilis saw Jack's brows get black.

"Look here, Bigham," said the lawyer, "the lady's a friend of Jack's, and you ought to know it."

Bigham looked at Cassilis and then at Jack, and snorted.

"Then she oughtn't to be, and it was my fault. She's —"

Jack was in a fury, and pushed his chair back.

"General Bigham, I won't sit and hear *any* lady abused. Mr. Cassilis is right, she is my friend."

There was a devil or a ring in Jack's voice, though he kept it down to a conversational level.

"I'm as good as a father to you, and I'm your father's pal," said the obstinate old soldier, "and I was brought up to do my duty —"

"Come, come, you've done it," urged Cassilis.

"Done it completely," said Jack, in a blazing quiet fury. "I wouldn't allow my father to talk as you do. Do you hear that, General Bigham? Mr. Cassilis, I should be glad if you will excuse me to-night. I'm not fit to stay."

He got up, and Cassilis did the same.

"My boy," said Cassilis, "I'm sorry this has happened."

"So am I," said Jack. "If he was a young man —"

Bigham shook his head.

"I'm done, I'll say no more. Jack, my boy, don't go. I apologize. I'll say she's what you like, damme if I don't. Tell him I will, Cassilis. I'll lie till I'm black in the face."

"Hold your infernal tongue," whispered Cassilis,

bending down to him. "All the room's looking at you."

"Let 'em; I've always done my duty," said Bigham. "I'm as good as a father to the boy, as good as a father to him."

But Jack shook hands with Cassilis, and left him to settle the affair with the general who had always done his duty. He went away and walked straight to Woodley Gardens. And, as he walked, his under mind told him that Bigham was perhaps right. He put away these thoughts, for they were cruel and disloyal. Whatever she was, she loved him! Whatever she was! He knew it was horrible of him to say that.

He let himself into his rooms at half-past nine and lay down on the sofa, feeling all shaken to pieces by the first real rage he had ever known. The whole business was hideously wrong and wretched and miserable, and he knew it. So true and sound a heart as his felt that there was something more in love and passion than he had yet known. Then was the fault all his? He knew that it was not. His instincts declared to him that if Renée's love was Love, then Love was a gross and dreadful thing. His mind returned again and again to Ashwood, and he saw the cool sweet eyes of Cecilia, who was like

the nymph of a pool compared with a creature of grossly burning fire.

"I'm a beast," said the poor boy. "I wish I was at home. I'll tell her to-morrow that I must go. Oh, Renée, Renée!"

He lay down upon the sofa.

CHAPTER IX.

THAT day had been a hard one for Jack Bexley, and, if he had been asked, he would have said that it had been an equally hard one for Renée, since any woman in her situation must of course have a bitter time. But he knew nothing of women, and least of all about such women as his mistress. She rarely suffered, and certainly did not suffer now. It was a monstrous pleasure to her to know that she was fooling every one. It gave her exquisite delight to know that Jimmy Buckingham, certainly no fool with others, was a fool in her hands. She played to him, and indeed played to Jack. If there had not been something in the background, she would not have found his poor company so entertaining. She even played to Lady Billy, who knew a great deal and suspected more. She knew about others, and had her grave suspicions about Jack. Arthur Rayley, whom Mrs. Buckingham neither liked nor trusted in the least (she certainly trusted Billy, for Billy was well paid for her poor friendship), had his suspicions, of course. But it was through

her very dislike of Arthur Rayley that Renée made her first mistake. It was one which might have showed her (if anything can show such a thing to so selfish a creature) that her intellectual equipment was not equal to the situation that her senses had created for her. For the very key-note of the selfish is their essential belief in their own ability. She amused herself by cutting Rayley in the Row. She had done it before, and had denied it later when it was convenient for her to do so. But, as it happened, she had never done it when Rayley was drunk, and when he was drunk he was exceedingly nasty and in every way unmanageable if things went the wrong way with him.

"Cuts me again, the ——!" said Arthur Rayley. "I'll get even with her for that!"

He chewed that insult all the day, for when he was drunk early he was drunk late, and he wondered how he could give her away without showing up in it. He promptly thought of an anonymous letter, and drew up one or two in the club. These he destroyed, for, drunk or sober, he retained, when he was alone, a certain wisdom of experience, and he was aware that such a letter was as unpardonable a sin as cheating at cards, with the additional disadvantage (the absence of which often made cheating quite feasible) of putting documentary evi-

dence in the enemy's hands. He decided in his mind that a little coarse slander would be a pleasing revenge, and, having drunk rather more than his usual discretion could stand, he slandered her at once, and by accident picked for that purpose a man who knew Jimmy Buckingham. As it happened, Gregson, the man in question, was so far from being a man of the world that he absolutely resented hearing anything to any one's disadvantage. It was with some vague knowledge of the fact that he was being offensive to Gregson as well as offensive to his enemy (so he called Renée) that Rayley selected him.

"Howlin' moral bounder, Gregson," said Rayley, whose dislike for any principle was extreme. "I'll put his back up."

He put poor little Gregson's back up completely, there was no mistake about that, and made him very miserable. He called Mrs. Buckingham "a cow." Offence could hardly go further, but he went further, and stated with alcoholic solemnity the fact that he knew young Jack Bexley was her lover.

"I — I — refuse to hear such things," sputtered and stammered the poor little inoffensive gentleman. "I — I protest, Lord Arthur Rayley, — I protest."

Rayley hiccoughed that Gregson could protest,

and be damned. "It's true," said Rayley, "and Buck knows it!"

Gregson got up and sought the secretary of the club, with a view of having Rayley expelled on the moment, and dropped into Piccadilly with a pair of tongs. The wretched secretary explained to him that he hated Rayley and wished he was dead, but that any kind of row would only make the matter worse.

"Of course, of course, I see," said Gregson. "I'll take other advice, and, if any other friend agrees, I'll say nothing. But I loathe Rayley."

He sought the advice of a friend, who had all the qualifications possible for giving the wrong advice in every conceivable situation of life. He was just and moral, capable of indignation, scant of mercy, intolerant, and very philanthropic to those with spotless characters and no backbone. He had a conscience, and so had Gregson.

"You must let Mr. Buckingham know what was said at once," said the philanthropic ass.

"Must I?" piped Gregson, who admired the adviser, and found the advice additionally agreeable, owing to the fact that his own poor conscience had been egging him on to the same mischief.

"Must I?"

"It's your duty, your absolute duty," replied his

friend. "How would you like it if some one came and said to me, 'Gregson cheats at cards'?"

Gregson owned that he wouldn't like it.

"Ought I not to acquaint you with so offensive and gross a slander, even though I do not approve of card-playing?" asked the prize idiot.

"I suppose you ought," murmured Gregson. "But it's a very disagreeable thing to have to do."

"I always do my 'duty, however disagreeable it is," said his friend.

There is very little doubt that the disagreeableness of his duty never deterred him.

"Very well, I will," said Gregson, plaintively.

"At once, I hope," said the other, with firmness.

"At once," said Gregson.

"I'm going to the Carlton now, so you might come with me," said the philanthropist. "We are sure to find Buckingham there."

They did find him. Or, at any rate, the philanthropist did, for at the very door of the Carlton Gregson quailed, refused to enter, and implored his good friend to drop the matter.

"After all, Rayley was drunk and probably didn't mean it," urged Gregson, "and why should Buckingham be told about it? It will only make mischief."

"Not at all, not at all, Gregson. If you refuse to tell him, I will. I hate these scandal-mongers, these — these destroyers of character. For the lady's sake it must be done. If you refuse to do it, I will."

Gregson did refuse, and even got angry, if such a pulpless little man could get angry.

"I won't speak to you again if you do, Martin. I'm sorry I told you."

Mr. Martin refused to yield.

"It *was* your duty; it now becomes *mine*," he declared. "I dislike Rayley extremely and loathe his character. I shall inform Buckingham. No, Gregson, you speak in vain. I know my duty and shall do it."

Gregson, having called such a spirit from the deeps of philanthropy, could do nothing to allay the devil. Martin wallowed in his virtue, and, like the genie from the bottle, obscured the very sun with moral bigness. Poor Gregson fled. Five minutes later the apostle of humanity begged five minutes' serious talk with Jimmy Buckingham, who was in a good temper for various business reasons. The chief was that the Prime Minister had been more than usually pleasant with him, and had committed himself by the very subtlest indications, if indeed such a subtle mind could commit itself to

anything but subtlety, to the gift of that peerage. Jimmy would have been nice even to Rayley at that hour, though he despised him as an idle and vicious fool.

"Certainly, Mr. Martin, what can I do for you?"

He could listen patiently to something which grieved the assister of virtuous poverty to the very heart. The exordium at any rate freed Buckingham from the fear that he was to be asked for a subscription.

"I'm grieved, deeply grieved, to say that a certain person whom I will presently name told a friend of mine, in fact, Mr. Samuel Gregson, whom you know a little, I think, something which I opined very strongly should be told to you, Mr. Buckingham, with a view of your taking proceedings against him," said Mr. Martin, loftily. "I hate scandal-mongers and talebearers and mischief-makers, and they should be put down with the strongest hand. It is with the utmost reluctance that I bring myself to tell you what Samuel Gregson told me, and which he should have told you. He has, however, gone away, fearing to do it, and I undertook it; for it so often falls to my lot to do the duty that others fail in that I am used to it."

Buckingham frowned.

"Well, well, what is it?" he asked, peremptorily.

Mr. Martin shook his head and his hair, which was very long.

"I regret to say that Samuel Gregson told me that Lord Arthur Rayley, while in drink, grossly insulted your good lady, Mrs. Buckingham."

Buckingham flushed.

"What?" he said, furiously. Though Martin was twice his size, he jumped.

"Shall I go on?" he asked, "or would you rather I held my tongue?"

It was rather late to ask that.

"What did he say?" asked Buckingham, looking like a devil incarnate.

Martin leant down and whispered what Rayley had said, and while he spoke Buckingham felt the sweat upon his brow.

"Crush the slanderer, Mr. Buckingham," said Martin, gravely, "crush him. I have done my duty. Do yours! It is every one's duty to crush those who insult innocence and beauty. You will give me credit, I'm sure, for the very best intentions."

Buckingham gave him the desired credit in a queer, subdued voice.

"I am obliged to you," said Buckingham. He could have killed him willingly. A moment ago

he had been as happy as it was in his nature to be, and now —

He got up and left Mr. Martin standing with his eyes fixed on the ceiling, as if the ceiling were the bar of heaven, which was about to acquit him of all sin and give him a certificate of virtue. Martin was very happy indeed.

"Poor Buckingham! He took it very well. But I did my duty. I think Gregson is a coward. But most men are cowards. I dare say I am the only man in London with the courage to perform so painful a duty! I will write to Gregson."

It was five o'clock when this happened, and the dinner at the whip's house was for eight o'clock. Ordinarily Buckingham would have been home by seven, but now he sent a message for his man to bring his things to the club. He went out and walked in St. James's Park, feeling that he did not know where he was or what he was doing. But all the time that he walked, he heard the purring and comfortable voice of Martin relating with infinite unction this damnable slander of Arthur Rayley's.

"This damnable slander," he said, and he said it over and over again. But deep in his mind there was a doubt, and he could not trample it down. It grew and grew.

"I've never been a jealous man," he said, "never, never! and I've given her everything, everything! My God! Oh, it can't be true! It can't be true! I'll kill him."

He knew it was not in him to kill any one.

"I was so happy to-day. And the Prime Minister took me by the arm! He never did it before. But that boy! I'll divorce her! It can't be true."

He sat down in the quietest place he could find, and the tears ran down his face. He thought of his early life.

"I've come up from nothing, nothing," he said, "and I'm a millionaire, and next year I shall be in the House of Lords! I took her from the gutter, and have kept her beggar of a mother in luxury at Clacton ever since, and I've given her everything. That Bexley, a boy! I don't believe it."

He got up and walked again.

"If it's true and I get a divorce, they'll never give me what they've promised. The scandal would be too much. I've lost it, after all. And Rayley said I knew!"

He writhed as he walked.

"I'll — I'll not lose it."

He left the park without knowing it, and went out by way of Birdcage Walk toward the Houses of Parliament. It was Saturday, and the precincts

were very quiet. Before he knew where he was, he found himself under Marochetti's statue of Cœur de Lion, in front of the House of Lords. He stood there for a quarter of an hour.

"I've come up from nothing, all by hard work, and next year I may go in here."

He saw himself in his peer's robes among the greatest names of England. There was a touch of the historic sense in his mean little soul: the place meant so much, so very much more even than success. But it did mean success for him to get there.

"I tied up sugar behind the counter," said Buckingham, acknowledging the fact to himself for the first time for years. "I—I filled pots with ha'porths of treacle, and I'm here, here only just outside."

He walked into the little garden above the House and sat down again.

"It's true—no, it's not true! But she brought this on me!"

He thought of the home she had, of the furs and jewels, of the horses and carriages he had given this woman. And she had so acted that this scandal was talked of her. If one said it, others would say it. If it were true, he must get a divorce. He saw the court, for he had once in his life seen a

case of that kind tried, and it made his flesh creep to think of all it meant. The government wouldn't give him the peerage, no, not even a baronetcy, until it had all blown over, and by then the Liberals might be in power. He looked up at the House of Lords again.

"I — I can't give it up," he said. "I'll put a case to Sadler."

Sadler was the whip at whose house he and his wife were to dine to-night.

"I'll put a case to him."

But he knew now that he couldn't give up the House of Lords. His wife, his love for her, his pride in her wit and beauty, were all accidents and accessories to the one great purpose of his life, — success!

He was astounded at the calm with which he faced the situation, and, when Renée called for him in her brougham, he spoke to her without any obvious sign of mental disturbance. As she would have said, and indeed had said a hundred times, to all appearance he was immersed in jam. Nevertheless, as he sat by her side the devil of jealousy tore at his heart. If this was true —

"But I must succeed!"

He put his case to Sadler. A man they both knew, who was looking for something from the

government, was going to divorce his wife. There would be a devil of a scandal. Did Sadler think it would make any difference to his getting the baronetcy he understood was to be offered to him? Buckingham added that he had spoken to Mrs. Buckingham about it, and she did not think it should.

"It might make all the difference in the world," said Sadler. "It would, I should say. Can you say who it is?"

Buckingham said that he couldn't. The case had been put to him in confidence.

"In fact, it was suggested I should speak to you. I can say it would be fatal?"

"Practically, for the time being," said the whip. "It wouldn't do, you know, unless of course the man in question was a stainless Galahad, and even then —"

On the whole, Buckingham agreed with Sadler.

"I believe you're right," he declared. "It wouldn't do. I'll tell him what you said."

He did his part in this talk quite admirably, with quiet restraint and yet with a fine managed (but not overmanaged) carelessness. Sadler suspected nothing, for Jimmy Buckingham had not got where he was without some power of acting. Yet in his

heart he was in the bitterest rage. To think of Renée playing the fool, even if it were not so bad as Rayley asserted! And to have such a man as Rayley saying these things!

"The beggar!" said Buckingham. It was the bitterest reproach he could make. He knew Arthur Rayley picked up a living anyhow. It would be necessary to talk to him, perhaps to buy his tongue.

The evening passed, and Renée enjoyed herself, as she always did when there were men about. But her husband was sombre and very quiet. It was just on eleven when they went away, for it was an early evening. Buckingham had made up his mind. Whatever happened, he meant being in the House of Lords. Nevertheless, Renée was to be spoken to, and the sooner the better. He spoke very soon and without any tact.

"Look here," said he, as soon as they drove away, "I heard to-day that that beast Rayley has been slandering you publicly."

She had not lived for so long a time on the verge of the precipice as to be taken aback. Nevertheless, a shiver ran through her in spite of her self-control.

"Don't talk to me of the beast," she said, quite calmly. "He slanders every one. I hate him. What's he been sayin' now?"

"What lots are thinking," replied her husband. "I forbid you in future to have that boy Bexley hanging round."

Renée turned and looked at him. She laughed.

"Oh, it's about poor baby Jack, is it?"

The odd thing is that she could feel that it was absurd to have such an infant for a lover. That Jack was very youthful and a fool gave her a curious feeling of innocence.

"I won't have him hanging round. I forbid it," said Buckingham, thickly. "I never spoke to you like this before —"

"I beg that you will never do it again," said Renée, in a dead cold voice. "I shall speak to any one I like. And I like to speak to Jack Bexley, who is a mere child and very nice to me. I will also speak to Arthur Rayley to-morrow, though I don't like to. That will do."

Buckingham was afraid of her, and always had been, and he knew it. Though he could have written her gutter pedigree, and knew his own was infinitely better, she had an air of being an aristocrat to which he would never attain. Nevertheless, and in spite of the restraint he put upon himself, her insolence cut him to the quick. She always behaved "like a lady," and when he was angry he was rude and clumsy.

"I shall speak in whatever way I like," said Buckingham.

"I shall not listen."

She settled herself in the corner of the carriage and looked out of the window.

"You will listen," said Buckingham. "I took you from the gutter —"

"Brought me with you, you mean," she interjected, irritably.

"And now you behave like — like —"

"Like what?" she asked.

He choked down the comparison, which certainly smacked of the streets.

"I — I've given you everything," he stuttered, "everything. You'll see no more of this Bexley."

"He's dining with us to-morrow night," said Renée. She had forced the poor lad to say he would come.

"He sha'n't enter my house," said Buckingham, wildly. "I tell you that beast Rayley said I *knew* he was your lover!"

"Don't repeat such things to me," replied his wife. "I simply will not listen. Be so good as to tell me if you believe what he said."

She played the game admirably.

"I don't know," said Buckingham. He knew

nothing, it seemed. He hung on to the point that he wouldn't have Jack in his house.

"You say you don't know," said Renée. "Until you do know, I refuse to speak to you. Mr. Bexley will come to-morrow. You may think that, as I have the misfortune to be your wife, you may insult me. But you have no right to insult him."

"I've given you everything, you and your beggar of a mother," said Buckingham, furiously. "By God, I don't believe she knows who your father is!"

There was no mistaking the fact that he had lost his temper at last. The truth had not touched the woman by his side, but this insult to the one poor creature she had ever really loved stung her to the quick.

"You cad," she said, "you foul cad. Get out of the carriage or I'll stop it and get out now and take a hansom."

She could have struck him, and he knew it. And he knew what a beast he had been.

"I beg your pardon," he began, but she threw the carriage door open.

"Will you go, or I?" she demanded.

"Be reasonable."

She flamed at him.

"To speak of my mother!"

He stopped the brougham, and got out, stam-

mering, "I beg your pardon!" And Renée burst into tears.

"Poor mamma," she said. The brougham drove on to Hyde Park corner. There she suddenly ceased crying; and, pulling the check-string, told the coachman to drive to Woodley Gardens.

CHAPTER X.

It seemed to Jack Bexley that he had been asleep for hours when he suddenly awaked without, for the moment, being aware of what had aroused him. Then he knew that some one had opened the outer door with a key, and his first thought was that the man belonging to the Mansions who valeted him and half a dozen others, had come in late, as he so often did. Jack had started up from the sofa, but when this occurred to him he lay down again. Yet Renée had more than once come in much later than that, for it was only ten, and this thought made him jump to his feet. There was only one light turned on, and that was shaded by a red shade, and when the door opened he saw nothing. He heard a muffled exclamation and knew that, whoever it was, it was neither Renée nor the man he thought it might be. He walked to the open door and turned up all the lights at once. There was some one he did not know and had never seen leaning against the door-post within a foot of him.

"Who the devil are you?" he asked, fiercely.

He saw the man plainly: he was tall and very thin, with sunken cheeks and heavy, sorrowful eyes. A long moustache drooped over his mouth, his clothes hung on him loosely, it seemed that he would have fallen but for the support of the door. At his feet was a small brown kit-bag, which he had dropped when Jack turned up the lights. He stared at Jack with a strange and very bitter smile.

"I suppose," he said as he stared, "I suppose I ought to congratulate you!"

"Who the devil are you, and what do you mean?" asked Jack. The man was a gentleman; though his words came from him heavily, his accent was refined. He was a soldier, too, that was obvious, and he came from some damnable hole in the Empire, which reeked and rotted with fever.

"Who am I?" asked the stranger, and as he spoke he let go the door and reeled. He almost pitched into the room, and Jack saved him from falling.

"Thank you, old chap," said the stranger. "May I sit down?"

He sat down heavily without waiting for permission. He stared about him.

"This is 63?"

"It is," replied Jack, with a frown.

"I thought I'd got into the wrong place, but it's

63 all right," said the stranger. "God, don't I know it?"

"It's not your place, anyhow," said Jack, "and I'll trouble you to go. I don't know you. How did you get in?"

The stranger smiled wanly, and fished for a key.

"With this," he said, "how did you think I did it? I feel ill. Have you any brandy?"

He looked at the cupboard where the spirits were kept, and he saw Jack's eyes take on a strange aspect of alarm.

"Oh, I know where she kept 'em," said his guest.

"She?"

"To be sure, old chap, I know."

He leant his head against the door, and looked deadly ill. Without knowing what he did, Jack got out the brandy and gave him some. What did he mean by "she"? The boy's mind was in a whirl; he drank a little brandy himself. He took it without water, as the other man did. They stared at each other.

"Can't you guess who I am?" asked the other man.

Jack whispered that he couldn't guess. His eyes almost started from his head. Somehow he did guess, but refused to put his guess into words, or even into formulated thoughts.

"Been here long?" asked the stranger. He did not wait for an answer, but wandered around the room with his eyes.

"Every stick just the same," he murmured. He looked at Jack again.

"Damn funny, isn't it?"

It was "damn funny," indeed, but Jack couldn't speak.

"You don't think I'm mad, by any chance, do you?" asked the visitor.

Jack shook his head.

"I wonder if I am," mused the other. "I say, is this 63 Woodley Gardens, London, England, by any chance?"

His eyes burnt strangely, and Jack answered in all soberness, "Yes."

"It's not a damnable, rotten, filthy, stinking swamp somewhere in the back parts of that God-forsaken hole, Nigeria, is it?"

Jack started.

The other man opened the palms of his hands in an odd, weak, deprecatory way.

"That's all right. It's dear old England, dear old England, and London, dear old London, and Woodley Gardens, dear and damnable old 63. Where's the lady, old chap?"

Oh, this was clear enough, clear even to Jack,

who had never been famous for seeing through brick walls.

It was as clear as death. He jumped to his feet and stammered unintelligibly, as he sometimes had done as a child when he was very angry.

"Sit down, old chap, and let's talk about it," said the visitor. "As long as you aren't a doctor, or a dream, or a bit of swamp-fever delirium, you're all right, and so am I. Don't you guess who I am? I'll swear she's made you savage by talkin' of me. That's one of her tricks."

Jack knew who he was!

"You're George Raynour," he stammered.

Raynour laughed.

"I'm George Raynour, what there's left of me. I say, old chap, give me a drop more brandy."

Jack gave it him.

"Sorry to worry you, I'm sure," said Raynour, "but I was devilish ill all the way home, and fainted in the railway carriage from Liverpool. And you must own, old chap, that was a bit of a shock to find you here in my flat."

Jack burst out at last.

"What d'ye mean? Who are you talking about? How can it be your flat?"

"Good Lord," said Raynour, "how do you

know I'm Raynour, poor damn fool Raynour, unless she told you of me? I say — "

He looked up at him, oddly, beseechingly.

"I say, old chap — "

The repetition maddened the boy.

"Good God, man, what do you mean? "

"I say, old chap, will you give her the chuck now? "

He spoke in an accent of forlorn abandonment, in an accent of prayer.

"You'll give her the chuck? "

Jack mouthed "who" at him, and Raynour gave a half-laugh.

"Who? you knew; 'Mrs. Simpson!' "

Jack's eyes cleared. It wasn't Renée, then, but Mrs. Simpson, who was in India with a beast of a husband. He gasped with relief.

"She's in India," he said.

"Rot," said Raynour, "she's nothin' of the sort."

"She is, and has been there for two years."

Raynour sighed.

"We're playin' criss-cross," he said. "I mean Mrs. Buckingham, old chap, and you know as well as I do she's Mrs. Simpson."

Jack jumped to his feet, and went up to Raynour as if he would strike him.

"No, my boy," said Raynour, quietly, "you can't

strike me. You'd kill me if you did. I'm so weak I can hardly stand. Sit down, sit down close, and let's clear it all up. Do sit down."

He added that irritably.

"You — you mean that Mrs. Buckingham is Mrs. Simpson?"

"There's no Mrs. Simpson," said Raynour. "I say, what's your name? Let's start all fair."

Jack told him his name.

"Good old fightin' family. Why ain't you in the service?" asked the soldier.

"Tell me what you mean?" said Jack, ignoring the question.

"Sit down," said Raynour. Jack sat down. Raynour looked around the room again.

"You don't half-believe me, I can see," said Raynour. "Look here, old chap, open the cupboards under the bookcase."

"They're locked," replied Jack, uneasily.

"Then unlock 'em."

"I've not the keys."

"I have," said Raynour. He fished a ring of keys from his pocket.

"I'll tell you what's in 'em. Did the lady say they were Mrs. Simpson's?"

He knew the lady; yes, he knew her.

"Open that cupboard, Mr. Bexley," said Ray-

nour, "and fish out an old racin' saddle and two old cricket bats of mine, with my name on 'em, and some boots and spurs and the devil knows what, — all very appropriate for a lady called Mrs. Simpson. Open it, old chap."

Jack did as he was told, and found all that Raynour had named. Raynour lay back and laughed.

"Lively, isn't it?" he asked. "Damnably funny. I say, she's a wonder. Old chap, she gave me this outside key, too. Is the bedspread with the Japanese dragons still on the big bed in there?"

He nodded toward the inner door of the big bedroom which opened on the room in which they were. Jack sat on the floor among the things he had pulled out of the cupboard. He was stunned and helpless.

"Oh, yes," he replied. He felt unable to move, to think, to act. And yet he said deep in him that this was no more than his instincts had warned him of. Raynour leaned forward and clapped him on the shoulder. Jack didn't resent it.

"Buck up, old man," said Raynour, "you'll get over this. And I sha'n't."

He was so wan and weak, so torn and haggard, that Jack was very sorry for him, very sorry. Renée was — oh, what was she not?

Raynour gasped a little, and it sounded like a

sob. Then tears rolled down his face. He apologized.

"Don't mind me," he said, "I'm so weak, you see, and, though I knew she was a bad 'un, I didn't think she was quite as bad as this. I've had a hell of a time in Nigeria."

He wept quite quietly, and Jack's heart was touched by his dreadful weakness.

"I suppose you'll chuck her now?" asked Raynour again, with the same horrible beseeching note in his voice.

"Yes."

Jack heard his own voice answer and wondered.

"Of course you will," said Raynour. He added, "I can't."

"Good God!" said Jack.

"I tell you I can't," said Raynour. "She's a devil, she's a drug with me, a drink, she's my damnation, boy. I can speak of her, for I loathe her, and I can't do without her! I can forgive her anything — anything!"

He put his hand on Jack's shoulder.

"Perhaps this is lucky for you, old chap. But you're young and strong, and I'm only thirty-three; but I'm old and half dead, and this creature can do what she likes with me. She said, 'Come back,

come back when you like; you'll find this place and me.' When was she here last?"

There was the first touch of savage jealousy in his voice. Jack could not, would not, answer.

"I'll pack my things," he said.

"Yes, pack 'em," said Raynour, eagerly. "I'll stay here."

The degradation of the man was dreadful, and he knew it.

"I'm a broken rotter," he said, bitterly, "and I was a man once. Aren't you going to pack?"

Jack picked up things belonging to him, and Raynour every now and then asked him if something was not his. And then he went on talking.

"It was horrid out there, old chap, rotten, oh, horrible. They stuck me in a blasted swamp, and the other man with me kicked. I buried him, and stayed well myself. Nothing to do and nothing to say, — swamps and flies and fever and ghastly dreams that killed the niggers and passed me by. I say, there's a knife of yours; it wasn't here before. I wanted to come home. She was in my bones. I ached. It was horrible! I've seen chaps want to drink and try to keep off it, and I've seen 'em fight for it and get it and go out howling with a bottle of gin. I was like that. I wanted to be invalided and get to her. I nearly

ran. She wrote to me every week — I'll say that for her — and made me sick to come. And there wasn't any fightin', not a show for it. They get it all the other end of the country. Don't mind my talking; it does me good. I rather like you, old chap, but you'll get over this. Where was I? I say that cap's yours, ain't it? Or is it an old one of mine? But, as I was sayin', I couldn't be ill. One night I got desperate, and I said I'd get ill or die, and I got out of bed and went out in my pyjamas to an old filthy swamp, and I sat there naked with the devils of mosquitoes at me. I said it's a toss-up. Either I get back to Renée, or I die, — what did it matter which? I nearly pegged out, but my boys carried me ravin' in a litter for ninety miles and planked me down before the doctor. And they let me go, and here I am. I came along from Liverpool, saying, 'Renée, Renée,' and I came up here, leavin' all my other things at Euston, and I found you, you!"

He burst out into a cackle of laughter, and asked for more brandy.

"I don't drink," he said, as he swallowed it, "don't think that. I was as sober as a man could be out yonder, backing up the Empire and havin' such a time! Ain't you packed yet?"

But Jack was listening and wondering how any

man could come to that. He moved like one in a dream. The black swamp and the naked wretch in it who loved white-armed Renée, and the sounds of the forest and the illimitable lands of fevered Africa came up before him. And while Raynour had sat and groaned and soaked in fever, he and Renée had been playing, and she had been writing letters to this man, whose passion clung to his rotting bones as the fever clung. It was dreadful, dreadful! These things happened then, and Renée was vile, vile!

Jack spoke at last:

"Good God! how can you say such things?"

"What things?"

"About — her?"

Raynour cackled again.

"Not good form, is it? But what's the use of form between you and me. She's what she is, and I —"

He looked dreadful, and shivered violently.

"This rotten fever's on me again," he said apologetically. "Give me my bag, old chap. I'll have some quinine."

Jack brought his bag and opened it, for Raynour was shaking. His hands trembled so that he could not open it himself. But when he had taken twenty

grains of quinine, he was still anxious that Jack should go on packing.

"I'm sorry to be such a wreck," said Raynour, "but it's wonderful that I should be here at all. I might have been green bones in Nigerian mud by now. I've had a time. Lend me a rug."

Jack put a rug around him.

"What a good chap you are," said Raynour, sighing, "a real good chap. I say this is a devilish odd situation, ain't it? I've been in some queer ones in my life, but this bangs the devil. Go on, don't mind me, I must talk."

Jack opened the bedroom door and brought out his toilet things and shoved them into his bag. Raynour followed him eagerly in all he did.

"Looks as if I wanted to hurry you out of this, don't it?" he grinned. "Oh, Lord, what do you think of me? Did you ever see such a wreck? What will she say?"

Bit by bit, Jack Bexley recovered himself, for the mere fact of doing something made him quieter and more his own. He looked up angrily.

"I wish you'd not speak of her."

"I won't, old boy, if you don't like it," said Raynour. "I wish I was as young and strong as you. Why ain't you in the service?"

"My people wouldn't let me go. I'm an only

child," said Jack, sulkily. "I wanted to be a soldier always, always."

"My soldiering's done," said Raynour. He spoke weakly and his teeth chattered, "but I don't care. I care about nothing, but — oh, but I said I wouldn't. I wonder I don't hate you," he added, "but I don't. You'll have a fine time by and by. You'll get over this. I sha'n't."

There was something more and more pathetic about the man, and Jack's heart, for all its bitterness, softened to *him* at any rate.

"Why can't you chuck it, too?" he asked, suddenly. "If we'd met in other circumstances, I'd have liked you, I think."

Raynour smiled.

"You'd have liked me well enough, old chap. What would I give to be as sound as you! You're all right."

Jack snapped his bag to and rose to his feet.

"Look here!" he said, and then paused.

"What, old boy?" asked Raynour.

Jack stamped on the floor.

"I'm no damn good," said the boy, "I'm nothing! My people wouldn't let me be. I wanted to do something, always did. And this is what I've been at. I'm very unhappy. I never thought such things could be. How is it? How is it that

a woman — no, I won't speak of her! It makes me sick, Captain Raynour. And now I'm goin' and leavin' you here, if you like — ”

He paused and looked at Raynour.

“ Good old chap,” said Raynour.

“ Look here,” said Jack, in great agitation, “ I see she's not worth it, not worth it. I don't care if I do speak about her. She's — ”

“ Don't you think I don't know what she is,” said Raynour, bitterly.

Jack shook his head.

“ Look here,” he began again, “ I — I like you, and I hate to see this. Don't stay here, sir, don't! ”

Raynour hugged himself in his covering. His eyes burnt.

“ What did I sit in the swamp for but this — this — this? ” he asked. “ It's to this I've come.”

“ Oh, sir,” said Jack, “ for God's sake, don't. Look here, I say, you come home with me down to Sussex. We'll put you up till you're well. You'll like my father.”

Raynour nodded.

“ Good chap you are, oh, yes, you're all right. But I can't.”

“ You can,” said Jack.

Raynour stared hard at him.

“ My dear boy, I *can't*. I shall die of her and

the fever. You don't know her as I do. Did you ever hear of a chap called Ponsonby who shot himself?"

This was the dead man that Cassilis knew of, but Jack knew nothing of him. Raynour held up his hand.

"I say, old boy, she was in with poor Ponsonby when she took me up, and I didn't know, and poor old Ponsonby shot himself about it."

"Killed himself?" gasped Jack.

"That's her sort," said Raynour. "Blew his head off. I saw him. I knew him. He was a dear, dear pal of mine. And I couldn't leave her!"

Jack was as white as a sheet.

"Oh," he said, and Raynour swayed on his chair.

"I—I'd like to lie down," he said, weakly. "Help me into the other room."

Jack raised him to his feet, and Raynour staggered as if he would fall. The boy picked him up as if he was a child, carried him into the bedroom, and laid him on the bed.

"I'm not very heavy," said Raynour, with a ghost of a smile, and he added, "Cover me up with the dragon; I'm as cold as death."

Jack covered him with the quilt, on which was a big Japanese dragon, and looked down on him.

"I can't leave you like this, you know," he said.

"I'll be all right," replied Raynour. "I never thought to be here again."

He choked a little, and his teeth chattered once more.

"Shake hands, old chap," said the soldier.

And Jack shook hands with him.

"I haven't the least grudge against you," said Raynour. Jack's eyes filled with tears. He went back into the sitting-room. He heard Raynour sobbing.

"I—I can't leave the poor chap," said Jack, as he stood over his bag and stared at the wall. "I can't."

He looked into the room again and found Raynour quieter. He closed the door and walked irresolutely about the room. Then he picked up his pipe and filled it. He lighted it three times before it would go, and then he sat down and stared at the blank wall in front of him. This, then, was a woman's work. Poor Ponsonby! Raynour's "dear, dear pal," and Raynour himself in there, a man and yet no man, and Jack himself!

"I've been let off easy," said Jack. He shivered. He had been let off very easy indeed.

He heard the sound of another key in the outer door. This must be Dickson, the valet.

"I'll tell him I've a friend here; the poor devil must have some one to look after him."

The outer door shut, the inner door opened.

"Dickson," said Jack. He turned as he spoke, and there was Renée in the doorway smiling at him. She was a vision in white silk and diamonds, and looked very, very beautiful.

He sprang to his feet, and an instant was as white as her gown. Then he flushed crimson and went pale again. The still instant that she stood there, sheeny white against the gloom, radiant and happy, with the glitter of her jewels, was of strange length to him. His mind, which had been stunned by all that had happened that night, came back again to life under the sudden stimulus of her presence. She was a whip, a scourge, a flame. His heart stopped and went on again.

This was — such a woman!

"Jack," she said. She spoke lightly, clearly, passionately. She had seen nothing, nothing that was in him, nothing of the gear upon the floor. Her eyes were for him only.

And then as he stood still, a flicker of fear, of alarm, grew in her. She saw his lips move, but heard nothing. She mouthed a dumb word, too, and then repeated it aloud.

"What?"

She saw his hands clenched, his arms by his side. Why did he not come to her? Anger leapt into her eyes, for this was an insult. She read strange things in his face, — fear, dreadful curiosity, something not unlike loathing. He was an innocent boy!

Then she saw his packed portmanteau. Her eyes swept over it, and she noted the open cupboard, the saddle, the boots, the bats. She knew whose they were, and they brought her a degree of reassurance. The locked places had been Bluebeard's closets to a jealous boy; he had opened them, and had made much of what they concealed. And yet — why should he?

"What's the matter, Jack?"

His hands opened and shut; she saw his lips tremble.

"I'm — I'm going," he said, abruptly.

She let go the door and swept into the room.

"Why?"

Now there was hostility in her, sudden, but to be charmed away by a word. Jack gave her no word, but looked at the things on the floor.

"Why did you open those?" she asked, pointing to the cupboards.

"Whose things are they?" he answered, standing back from her.

"Mrs. Simpson's," she said. She heard a crackle

of laughter from him. He was wrought up to laughter rather than tears. And yet tears were in his voice.

"Simpson's," he repeated. He looked ten years older than his years. "Simpson" was in the next room. Poor devil! And poor Ponsonby!

An access of rage came to him. He pointed a shaking finger at her.

"I — I know you now," he said, "I know you!"

The burning light in his eyes cowed her not a little.

"Jack, you're mad, you're mad! What is it you mean?"

She spoke imploringly, for he looked dreadful. Such a woman who invites murder knows it. She had seen men with murder in their eyes, and loved and feared it, for it was the Great Game of all.

"I'm sane enough," he said, bitterly, but in a choking voice. "I don't want to see you again."

She closed upon him, and, losing his eyes, gained the courage she had lacked for a moment.

"What is it you have against me? These?"

She pointed to the things on the floor with scorn, and laughed.

"You stupid boy —"

"You devil!" he replied. She had found him

a boy, and now he was a man. "You — you devil! Where's George Raynour?"

She had made him jealous of Raynour, and had done it deliberately.

"Where — where should he be? How dare you speak like that to me?"

His eyes blazed.

"There are his things!"

He pointed to the things on the floor.

"They're not," she cried.

He picked up a bat, and on it was a plate with Raynour's name. She saw it and lied swiftly.

"He knew Mrs. Simpson —"

"Faugh!" said Jack.

She moved away from him.

"I had better go, since you cannot behave like a gentleman."

What did a gentleman do in such a case? How did he behave? Jack's heart was breaking, for he had loved her. His speech came back to him.

"Let me speak," he said. "Those things are Raynour's. You know it. You have written to him every mail. He used to live here, as — as I do!"

She saw the implication.

"No, no!" she cried, "you can't say that! Jack, don't be mad, cruel, wicked! It's not true!"

"He lived here," said the boy, "here, here!"

"Never," she cried, "and I loved you!"

"And you loved him!"

"It's a lie!"

"It's the truth, and I know it."

In a minute he would call Raynour, and then —

"It's not true," she cried. "He fell in love with me, and I would have nothing to do with him. I told you that, though I ought not to have done. I don't know how those things came here, but it was through Mrs. Simpson that I knew him, and they were at school together. I never loved any one but you, and you have treated me horribly, horribly!"

She burst into tears.

"Oh, most horribly!"

Jack laughed, and the devil that is in all men came up to the surface in him.

"What about poor Ponsonby?" he asked.

There were, as far as she knew, two in the world who were aware that Harry Ponsonby had killed himself through her. One was herself, and the other George Raynour. She moved back and fell into a chair and stared at him. Her face was drawn and dreadful to look at, for there was one raw place in her mind, and Jack had stabbed her there.

"You — you know?" she whispered. Now she

saw that he had more in his heart against her than she had believed. This was dreadful! Had she left any letters here?

"How did you —"

She finished her sentence with her eyes.

"I told you I knew you," said Jack.

"It's a lie, a damnable lie," she screamed. "I couldn't help it. I didn't kill him. Who told you? Who told you?"

She ran to him, and shook his arm furiously. He broke away from her.

"Raynour told me!"

"You lie, he didn't!" she screamed. "You don't know him."

Jack was facing the bedroom door, and he saw it open. George Raynour stood in the doorway, with a bitter smile upon his face. He leant against the door-post and didn't move.

"I know him," cackled the boy, with high-pitched laughter. "Oh, Renée, I know him! You're wrong if you think I don't; poor old chap! Damn good chap, too."

She clung to him, seeking for an explanation.

"You're mad! He's in Nigeria. I—I never loved him, and I've loved you! Don't be so cruel. Tell me who has said these things about me, and

"I'll explain everything and forgive you. Oh, tell me, tell me who it was?"

Jack stared over her head, as she tried to lay it on his breast, at the wan, satiric mask of Raynour in the dark doorway. The men's eyes met, and Raynour smiled.

"Let go of me," said Jack, "let me go!"

"Not till you tell me how you knew?"

"Knew about George Raynour?"

Raynour grinned. His burning eyes egged Jack on to torture her and himself.

"I never loved him, never, never!"

Raynour's mouth moved.

"You used to meet him here!"

"It's a lie," said Renée, "a lie."

Jack saw Raynour moisten his fevered lips. He made a half-step into the room. Then he spoke:

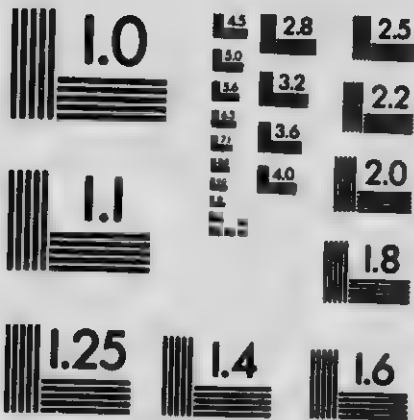
"Renée, you devil, don't lie to the boy," he said. She threw up her head, and then twisted about and saw him. Both men saw her rock on her feet, but it was only Raynour who saw her eyes. Yet Jack saw her hold out her arms and go stumbling to the wreck by the door.

"George, George," she cried, and, as she spoke, she fell on her knees, bowed her head, and went down upon her face in a dead faint.



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Raynour and Jack faced each other across her body.

"I'll go," said Jack, with a groan. "Shake hands, sir!"

"Good night, old chap," said Raynour.

Jack picked up his bag, and, as he shut the door, he saw George Raynour look down on the woman whom he loved.

CHAPTER XI.

JACK BEXLEY had gone five minutes before Renée Buckingham recovered consciousness, and all that time George Raynour knelt by her on the floor. His cheeks blazed now with the scarlet of high fever; his lips were cracked and parched. He murmured as he waited.

"You devil!" he said again and again. He looked up and spoke as if to some one in the room.

"I shall cut her throat some day!"

She opened her eyes and saw him again.

"It is you?" she asked, shaking.

He looked down on her with a sneer.

"Your true, your faithful lover!"

The tide of life which was ever strong in her came back now in flood. She turned on her side, clutched at him, and scrambled to her feet. He still sat where he was. She laughed hoarsely.

"I'm a beast, George."

He exploded with: "Tell me something I don't know. Oh, damn you!"

She wrung her hands.

"I've never loved any one but you —"

"You beastly thing," said Raynour. He broke down and sobbed.

"I thought of you always, always, out in that black swamp, and you —"

She fell on her knees and clutched his neck.

"Why did you go, why, why? I asked you not to. You knew me, you knew what I was."

Raynour groaned.

"That's fair enough, I knew. I accepted you, took you for what you were. I was the only man who did."

She laughed coarsely.

"The only one who does. I can't be myself with any one but you —"

"And this boy!"

"I hate him — now you're here," she whispered. She acted a little. "Oh, my life's been horrible since you went. I cried for days. I went mad. You must forgive me, George."

Raynour laughed.

"I'll do it. You — oh, but some day I shall cut your throat, Renée! How could you write to me as you did?"

She pleaded that she had told the truth, and perhaps she had.

"I've never loved any one but you. Oh, but

you are ill, George. Tell me everything. You sha'n't go away again."

He fell into weakness and lean^d against her as she knelt by him. He laid his wan face against her bosom. Her diamonds glittered over him; she was warm and sweet and an unfaithful mistress whom he adored. He told her of the days he had lived, had existed, and the anguish he had endured. She murmured sympathy.

"I—I hate the army, the Empire," she said. "But now you shall get well! Say you love me and forgive me!"

She twined herself about him.

"You are a devil!" said Raynour, "and you're a devil in diamonds and satin! And how's poor old Jimmy?"

She sulked suddenly.

"Let him be. I hate him. Isn't that enough for you? He's a cad. I told him so to-night."

Raynour sighed.

"What am I? A gent^l man and a soldier? How you could write as y^e did! I loved your letters."

She never wrote without abandon. That was her weakness. Any letter to Raynour or to Jack would have damned her.

"Have you burnt them?" she asked.

"I've got 'em in my bag."

"Give them to me; I'll burn them."

He refused angrily, and then softened.

"Let me keep 'em to think how I felt when I believed you," he said, turning to bitterness before his sentence was finished. "I'll give them you next time you come. I wanted you, Renée."

He told her what he had told Jack. He painted the night in the swamp for her, and she wept over him. The clock struck twelve. It had been a full hour. She sprang to her feet.

"I must go. It's reckless enough my having come —"

"To me, you devil!"

"To you, George! It must have been to you."

"I don't want you to go. Stay a bit. I've had over a year in hell, Renée."

He kissed her for the first time, and then half-threw her from him. "How could you write such letters!"

"Ah!" she said, suddenly, and he saw her mind go elsewhere. Her eyes went to the desk in the corner of the room by the window. Raynour's fevered mind followed her like a hound on quick and strong scent.

"Oh, his letters!"

She ran to the desk, pulled open a drawer, and

found it empty but for one letter lying at the back.

"Did he take them?" she asked in a whisper, but Raynour heard.

"The poor boy!"

He went up behind her and snatched the letter from her. She turned on him savagely.

"Don't you read it!"

"I will," he cried, desiring to torture himself.

"You sha'n't!"

She seized his hand and tore it from him, leaving a fragment behind.

"My darling," he read out, raging.

"You fool," said Renée, "I hate him now. He's only a boy, and —"

"I'm a man, eh?" said Raynour.

He screwed the paper up and threw it from him.

"Did he take them?" she asked. "Did you see him? I can't ask him."

He interjected: "What, you can't do anything! I don't know you. You're better than I thought. Kiss me, you devil, and go. Come to-morrow. I suppose he took them. Who else would want them but me to read and curse over?"

But there might be other uses for them.

"Oh, he's got them. Will you ever see him again?" she asked.

"I absolutely liked him," said Raynour. "We got quite pals. We shook hands over your damnable body, my girl. I said 'Good-bye, old chap.' If I see him, I'll ask for your letters."

"Good night," she said, throwing her arms about him.

She strained backward in his arms and stared him in the face.

"I'll be what you like, always. I love you, if I am a devil. You know me, and no one else does."

"That's something," he cried. She slipped from him to the door.

"To-morrow," she said, and was gone. He ran and saw her white silk gleam in the shadows of the stairs.

"Oh, back again," said Raynour. "I'm back in it again. Why didn't I die in the swamp?"

He tottered feebly into the room and went to the desk. He ransacked it for letters and found none. He heard the door.

"You left the outside door open, sir," said a voice behind him. He turned, and Dickson, the valet, exclaimed:

"Oh, sir, I thought it was Mr. Bexley!"

"No, Dickson," said Raynour, "I'm back again for a bit."

"You look ill, sir, can I get you anything?"

asked Dickson, who had always liked Raynour. All men did, somehow, even niggers.

"A sharp razor and a pint of arsenic," said Raynour, with a smile. "I'm a rotten wreck, Dickson."

"You'll pull round here, sir," said Dickson. "I'm rare glad to see you again, sir."

He helped the sick man to bed.

CHAPTER XII.

JACK said he had been let off easy, for the main thought deep within him was that all this was over, done with, finished for ever. In the front of his mind the scenes he had passed through stood out with all the roundness and distinctness of some terrible theatre. He saw poor George Raynour, a wreck who had once been a man, saw his wan eyes, his haggard face, his pallid lips. And then Renée, white, ardent, graceful, a liar and a wanton, with the grace (it hit him hard) that she apparently loved the soldier with all the soul she possessed. He heard the timbre of her voice, as she cried, "George, George!"

"She loved him all the time," said Jack. Raynour had said that he should some day kill her. Then in the background of everything lay the bleeding and sinister figure of this Harry Ponsonby. It was such women who slew men. It was horrible.

"I'm — I'm out of it," said Jack.

He came to his place in St. James's, and carried

his bag up to his room. His landlord, an old butler, opened his bedroom door.

"Is that Mr. Bexley, sir?"

Jack answered that it was. But it was not the same Bexley that old Fenner knew. It was a different man.

"I'm out of it."

He lay down and tried to sleep. And suddenly he remembered something. He rose hurriedly, and ransacked his portmanteau.

"I never brought away her letters. I must go back to-morrow and get them. Whatever she is, I must do that."

She might be vicious, cruel, unclean, a very devil, but he owed her that. This was what honour was for. Let her smirch her soul, if she would, but he must do nothing to smirch her. Yet he could have struck her then. He said he hated her.

"I hate her," he panted. "What a woman! I never knew there were such."

He had walked in green and golden meadows of great enchantment, by perilous waters that drew him on with their music. He had dallied in the cool hearts of forests with a white demon. Now the meads were parched, now the forests were on fire, now the white enchantress was a foul and mocking fiend, a thing without a soul.

"But I'm out of it. I've done with her and with London!"

To-morrow he would go back to Charteris and live cleanly.

"To-morrow!"

He thought of his father, and knew that the old man had known a great deal. Perhaps he had known everything. And of his mother, the dear cause of all his woe; and of the cool and sweet soul of Cecilia, lately become gracious to him. He groaned to think of the old days when he was clean and pure, for nothing that he had done before London took him seemed impure. He cast a thought, which was not unkind or accusing, at poor Molly Botfield. She was a simple creature, after all, and not vicious with the vice that he now understood too well. But Cecilia came most into his thoughts.

"If she knew, she would not speak to me. I—I like her very much. I'm not fit to speak to her."

He had to go back in the swamp (so he saw it suddenly, remembering the swamp that Raynour's tongue had pictured) to get those letters which spoke to him of passion that he had called love. It was a horrible thing to have to do. Yet he wanted to see Raynour again. He had been a fine chap (he was even yet, said Jack), and he might

be saved. It was monstrous and strange to think how they had talked, for this was the first touch of the real life, which grows things of terror, that Jack had known. He saw the man's eyes again, dim, sad, pathetic, tortured. His wasted fevered body bore witness to incredible sufferings. There must be worse in store for him. Again he saw the muffled throat and hidden head of the man Renée had killed for Raynour's sake. He wanted to see what he was like, wanted to know what he was, and why he had done it. For such a woman was worth nothing. Then he knew that the worst of the woman in such a case was nothing. The cult of the last dreadful passion of all lay in the man.

"I've never known that," he said. But he saw her letters again.

"I'll get them to-morrow and send them back to her."

He fell asleep as the dawn broke and slept till late the next morning.

When he rose, he could eat no breakfast, and, after drinking a cup of coffee, he walked through the parks to Woodley Gardens. He rang at No. 63 just as it struck eleven, and was let in by Dickson, who betrayed no surprise at any of the transformation scenes in the flat.

"Captain Raynour's in bed, sir," said Dickson.

"Is he very ill?" asked Jack, nervously. "Will he see me?"

"Of course, sir, he's not very ill. But he *was* bad last night. I'll ask him, sir."

Jack found Raynour looking bad enough in all conscience. He was the colour of clay, and still unshaved. But he actually smiled when Jack came in.

"I've come," began Jack, nervously. "I've come —"

"I'm glad to see you," replied Raynour, "and ain't it rum that I should be? Sit down, old chap, and let's have it out."

Jack sat down, and then got up again and walked about.

"I — I can't sit down, sir. Shall we be disturbed?"

He feared that Renée might come. Yet, as he knew, she rarely rose before eleven even in summer.

Raynour knew his mind.

"No, no!" he said. Then he added: "What's wrong?"

Jack muttered nothing was wrong, but —

"I've come for something I left behind," he blurted out.

"Take it, old chap," said Raynour. "How are you feelin' about it this mornin'?"

He asked anxiously.

"Did you have a rotten night? I did."

Jack mumbled that he had, that he hadn't, that he didn't know. Then he looked at the sick man.

"I say, have you any pal to look after you?" he asked.

"Most of 'em are in the mud," said Raynour.

"I've no one here. I wish you were my pal."

He spoke wistfully.

"But that can't be," he murmured. "You don't hate me, though, old chap? I can't help all this, you see."

"Of course not," said Jack. "I wish you'd do what I said yesterday. I—I meant it."

"Come to your place, you mean?"

"Yes," said Jack, "it would do you good."

Raynour groaned weakly, and then lay back on his pillow.

"Good old chap. But I can't. Shake hands."

They shook hands.

"I'm in London again," said the soldier, "dear old rotten London. It's too wonderful. When I got to sleep last night, I dreamed I was in the swamp, with a lot of niggers potting at me with trade-guns. I had a hell of a time. Don't you go into the service. There's nothin' in it."

He lay in silence, and Jack never spoke for many minutes. Then he said:

"Can I do anything for you, sir? Can I get a doctor?"

"To the devil with 'em," said Raynour. "They can tell me I'm ill; they can't do more. You can see that without charging a guinea. I'll be all right in a day or two. What was it you came for?"

"Oh," said Jack, remembering the letters. "I left something in the desk. I'll get it now."

He went into the sitting-room and came back in less than half a minute. He was very white.

"What's wrong?" asked Raynour.

"They — they are gone," said Jack.

"What?"

"Some — letters," said Jack.

"Hers?" asked Raynour, harshly.

"Yes," said Jack. "You — haven't seen 'em? I find the 'drawer unlocked."

Raynour grinned.

"*She* found it unlocked, old chap, and she thought you had taken 'em. There was only one left, and we fought over it. You must have 'em."

Jack sat down and stared at him.

"I — I haven't got 'em," he said, thickly, "and I must give 'em back or destroy them."

Raynour laughed bitterly.

"They ought to be burnt. Perhaps they went off spontaneously, old chap. Her letters were hot enough."

Jack's face burnt furiously. This astounding want of reticence, this insulting knowledge of the woman, seemed so dreadful to him.

"They'd ruin —"

"They'd ruin any one," said Raynour, "I know that. If you haven't got 'em, who has? You'll acquit me of wantin' 'em?"

"Oh, yes," said Jack. "Some one must have stolen 'em."

"Pretty readin' they'd be," said Raynour. "Could any of the servants —"

"Dickson?"

"Oh, he's as honest as daylight. I've known him for years," said Raynour. "He knows everythin', and is as close as wax."

"Till last night, I never left the room without lockin' 'em up," said Jack, with scared eyes. "I owed her that."

"Who's been here but her?" asked Raynour.

Jack shook his head.

"Not a soul! Oh, yes, one, but it couldn't be she."

Raynour laughed.

"You still trust any she? Who was it?"

"I don't suppose you know her," said Jack. "It was Lady Wilhelmina Rayley."

Raynour laughed again.

"Don't I know Lady Billy just? Oh, Lord, I know her! And I wouldn't trust her out of my sight. How much money does she owe you?"

Jack stiffened.

"Oh!" he said.

"As much as you could stand, old chap. She's greedy, isn't she? She borrowed money of me, and cheated me at cards. She came here with the other several times, came to tea, you know. Made it look better, you know. She's got 'em."

"Got the letters!"

"That's her sort," said Raynour. "I'll bet she'll bleed some one, you for choice. She loves Mrs. Renée, I know that, and it's damn odd that she does. I know her husband, a beastly blackguard. I'm sure she's got 'em. Was she ever here alone?"

She had come in with Renée not more than three days ago, and Renée had gone away for an hour.

"She might have been here alone for a few minutes," owned Jack. "Oh, but it can't be true!"

Raynour knew better.

"I know this lot," he declared, "and there isn't a spark of honour in the gang. Lady Billy is a

rotter of the worst description when money's about. Do you mean to say you've never noticed it?"

Jack remembered the scene in the restaurant, and his face changed.

"You have," said Raynour. "Tell us. Don't mind givin' her away. She's no better than a thief. What's the yarn?"

Jack told him, and Raynour lay back in the bed and roared with laughter.

"By Jove, how like her," he cried. "What a picture of the dear. And yet she ain't a bad sort in some ways. She'll do any one a good turn if it costs her nothin' but trouble. Give her her cab fares, and she'll take busses and work like a slave for a pal. She's got those letters, and you'll see it soon. Mrs. B. will be in a stew."

It was Jack who was in a "stew." He looked horribly uncomfortable. Raynour tried to comfort him.

"Make love to Billy and lend her some cash, and you'll touch her heart. She's got one somewhere. I like her, really I do. There's lots worse than poor greedy Billy. Make love to her. Rayley won't be jealous, and, if he is, give him a few sovs."

"I don't know what to do," said poor Jack, who had said that he had got out of it easy.

"I—I thought it was all finished," he said, mournfully.

"Nothin's finished with this lot," replied Raynour. "But let 'em suffer. Mrs. B. can stand the racket. What's it to you?"

But it was much to Jack. It was the point of honour.

"I *ought* to have burnt 'em," he murmured, miserably. "It was my fault if she's taken 'em."

"They'd read well in court," said Raynour. "Some of those rotten divorce lawyers would gloat over 'em."

Raynour was given to having uncomfortable and unpleasant thoughts. Jack thought of his mother, and of Cecilia. Raynour went off on a side issue.

"How can a gentleman be a divorce lawyer?" he asked.

It didn't interest Jack.

"And no one but a cad could live in the atmosphere of the divorce court as a judge," he went on. "But I hate all lawyers."

This was almost totally irrelevant, but so far as it went it stung Jack. The notion of being a correspondent was horribly unpleasant.

"What shall I do?" he asked.

"Sit tight," said Raynour. "Nothin' is lost by sittin' tight. If she's got 'em, let her have the

shame of mentionin' the fact. Don't make it easy for her. If she bleeds you, don't be bled. Tell her to go to the devil."

It would not be so easy. At least Jack thought not.

"You see it's my fault. I ought to have burnt 'em," he insisted, pathetically. "They would ruin her!"

"Serve her right," said Raynour, savagely. "I say, do you think me an awful bounder to talk as I do?"

Jack shook his head.

"I think I can understand it," he replied. He was beginning to understand many things.

"You go home," said Raynour. "That's the place for you, old chap."

"I think I will," said Jack. "I wish you'd chuck all this."

"I've to go through with it, old chap, unless I cut her throat and my own," said Raynour, gloomily. There was a sombre look about his face that fitted his words.

"Good-bye," said Jack. The sick man smiled up at him.

"Good-bye, old chap. I'd like to see you sometimes."

Jack went out of the room with tears in his eyes.

Raynour called after him:

"I say — you don't think I'm quite a bounder, do you? You see I've had a rotten time."

"I don't think so," said Jack; "it's not your fault."

"Perhaps not," said Raynour. "But greedy Billy has those letters. Don't you forget I said so."

He was quite right; for Lady Billy had stolen them.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE man who made the mischief got out of it easiest of any one. That was only natural. Jimmy Buckingham had no desire to make any scandal; and, indeed, his wife's demeanour when they had the row going home from Sadler's quite convinced him that there was nothing serious in the affair with Jack Bexley. But it was necessary to stop such a mouth as Arthur Rayley's, and to stop it at once. Nothing was easier, as it turned out, for when Rayley got sober again he regretted what he had done.

"I get nothing out of it, do I?" said Rayley to himself. "After all, I dare say she didn't see me, and she'd ha' bin just as nice and ready to part over bridge the next time."

Decidedly he got nothing out of it. When he faced Jimmy Buckingham, he did it with an air. There was nothing of the half-way in Rayley.

"What do you say?" he shouted. "I slander your wife? By God, sir, who says so? I'll — I'll kill him."

He played a perfect fury, and Jimmy, half-believing what he wanted to believe, begged him to be calm.

"But Gregson says you did," he remarked, "and I think you will agree with me that you ought to see him before me."

Rayley shook his head at the wickedness of Greg-

SON.

"He must have been drunk, Mr. Buckingham, drunk, very drunk. See him, of course I will. He must have been drunk or mad! You actually mean to say he came and told you this?"

Buckingham explained that Gregson had told Martin, who had done his infernal duty with a view of getting Rayley into trouble. Rayley lifted his eyebrows.

"He's a philanthropist, is he? He sets up to be a moral leader. I hope you'll squeeze him, Mr. Buckingham. I'd see him and Gregson if I were you. But we can find Gregson now. Let's go."

They found Gregson, and when he saw the two together, the poor little man wondered what was going to happen. He wanted to wrap himself in the *Daily Telegraph* and get under a sofa. He stammered salutations when they spoke to him. Rayley was very indignant and as red as a beef-steak with virtue.

"I understand you say I slandered Mrs. Buckingham!" he said, sternly.

Gregson trembled, but looked at him all the same.

"So you did. Do — do you deny it?"

"You must have been drunk," said Rayley. "I never said anything to the lady's discredit."

Gregson was astounded, and stammered something unintelligible.

"You — you say you didn't?"

"Of course I didn't, you little hound," said Rayley. "Such people as you —"

"My God!" said Gregson, who didn't know whether he was on his head or his heels. The magnificence of the lie appalled him. And yet it was possible that Rayley had been so drunk that he didn't remember what he had said.

"You were drunk," said Gregson.

Rayley turned to Buckingham and sneered.

"This little slanderous beast! I'll sue him for damages, and I recommend you to do so," he said.

"Who are your witnesses that I said this?"

"Mr. Martin," stammered Gregson.

"You told him!"

Gregson almost fainted.

"So I did, so I did!"

"I'll sue him, too," said Rayley, who began to see money in the affair all around.

"Then you withdraw what you said?" Buckingham asked.

"I never said anything against the lady. I was defending her," pleaded poor Gregson.

"You are a liar," said Rayley, coarsely. "You will hear from your solicitor, and so will your virtuous friend, Martin."

Gregson wailed that Martin was no friend of his. He had tried hard to prevent him speaking.

"I'm sorry I told him," said poor Gregson, who was very fond of money, and saw that he would be bled in the most unjust and iniquitous way.

"I think we may go, Mr. Buckingham," said Rayley, loftily. "I'm sure he'll say no more. You will hear from me shortly, Mr. Gregson."

Gregson did hear, and his solicitor compounded with the enemy for £250. For it was obvious that he had no case. The philanthropist was also bled to the same tune, and he had no philanthropical feelings ever afterward for Gregson, Rayley, or Buckingham. But he held his tongue. Rayley borrowed some money from Buckingham on the strength of his noble and disinterested conduct.

"If I'd pushed the matter and gone into court, I could have got a thousand pounds," said Rayley. "My solicitor said so."

His solicitor had said that a man of unblemished

character might have got that, or more. But he had pointed out to Rayley that £250 was better than twice the amount and a stiff cross-examination into his habits, which would certainly be relevant to the issue. For this same solicitor had once advised his client to pay up and look pleasant when he had slandered some one before witnesses. And it was notorious that he had a blackguard tongue. He did well on the whole, for he got five hundred out of Martin and Gregson, and a hundred out of Buckingham. His wife squeezed the third of it out of him, but he was flush for a couple of months afterward, and felt very much pleased with himself.

Lady Billy was also amazingly pleased, on the whole. She invested her two hundred promptly, and said that she had paid bills with it.

And she had the letters. She had taken them on the spur of the moment, having the idea in the back of her mind that they might be worth something. As it had happened, she was very cross with Renée that day, for Renée had refused to lend her any more money for a whole month.

"I can't and I won't," said Renée. She was not in the least afraid to refuse Billy, for Billy was really very fond of her. She had never given her any confidence, and Billy, in spite of all she suspected about Raynour and Jack, really knew nothing

definitely till she stole poor Jack's bundle of incriminating letters.

They were amazing reading, and Billy devoured them all through the long night, finding them far more interesting than any novel she had ever got hold of.

"It is quite wonderful," said Billy, "how very little we know of any one. They absolutely make me blush!"

Some of them would have made Parian marble blush. That is the truth.

"*How* can she have dared to give herself away like this?" asked Lady Billy, as she turned out the light and saw the dawn. "They talk about love-letters! If these were published, they'd sell a million."

She had a fairly accurate notion of what would sell.

"They would sell to Renée for quite a lot," she murmured, "and, if I didn't like her, still I'd see. Mr. Bexley will be in a state about losing them. Arthur shall never see them."

She fell asleep and dreamed of money. For many months afterward, her great virtue was that she made no use of the letters. They gave her an enormous sense of power. If she ever did get into difficulties —

"Now I've nearly got ten thousand pounds," she said, as she hugged the thought. "I don't care, and I love Renée, though she is so horrid."

Not a soul knew she had them. And not a soul but her solicitor had any idea that she was a miser of the grossest description.

"I'm worth ten thousand! I always wanted ten thousand."

Her difficulties began when the ten thousand was exceeded. If she had never gone beyond that amount, she might have sat on the letters till she died. But Renée lent her another hundred pounds.

"When I have twenty thousand —" said Lady Billy. Her eyes glittered at the notion, but she groaned to think of all the time it would take to accumulate so much as that.

She had begun saving even before her marriage, though she and her family had always been as poor as rats in a collier. When she married Lord Arthur Rayley, he was fairly well-to-do; but she bled the household money in the most drastic way. This had had its effect on Rayley, for he found it absolutely impossible to get a good meal at home, and his total ignorance of accounts, which he only knew enough about to get wrong, never permitted him to discover what he was doing. He had always been a loose fish, but now he became looser than

ever, a mere club and restaurant haunter, a polite or unpolite blackleg. It is possible that a decent wife might have saved him, for she certainly pushed him faster on the wrong road than he would otherwise have gone. Now she was nothing better than a monomaniac about money, and her delight in her secret accumulations was the intensest passion she had ever known. She would lie or thief or cheat for half a crown. But so far she had hesitated at blackmail, though she had insisted on shares with Rayley when he had got cash by some means not far removed from it.

Now she set her eyes on Jack Bexley as a possible mine.

Yet, when she discovered that Jack and Renée had quarrelled, she feared that he would tell her to do her worst if she approached him.

"But he's *very* honourable," said Lady Billy. "I don't think he'd be such a cad as that!"

She was an amazing person, and did not know it. Any sins of hers she put down to her husband's account. She compounded for them over and above by saying, and really meaning, that whatever happened she wouldn't do Renée any harm.

"She's been very good to me," said Billy.

The two hundred and fifty or thereabouts that she owed Renée was really a small part of what she

had had from her. The debt had accumulated again and again, and had been wiped off the slate at such times as Buckingham had been exceptionally generous to his wife. And to speak the truth, much of the position that Renée occupied in society, even if it was not very "swagger," was due to Lady Billy, who had retained her popularity in spite of her meanness. This was put down to her poverty and to the way Rayley treated her. And she was essentially a likable woman, gay and talkative and by no means a fool. She was shrewd enough not to be too clever at other people's expense. She not only defended Renée, but others as well, from all hinted insinuations. Any slandered lady (even the notorious Mrs. Wankley, whom Cassilis had denounced as wanting Jack for herself) could get Lady Billy to defend her in public in the handsomest way.

"There's nothing in it, I can assure you," she would say. "He's in love with some one else. I know it as a fact, and the *person* is not one whom *we* can know."

She defended Renée by aspersing her heart and her affections.

"She's an iceberg, really!"

And out of such ice came such flaming letters! Lady Billy knew she could have written nothing

like them to anything but a thousand-pound note. She sighed to think that she really, really loved Renée. If Renée ever ceased to love her — the letters might be useful.

Lady Billy admired La Rochefoucauld, and actually read him.

Nevertheless, it was a pity that Jack would not now really care what happened to the letters. She said this when she learnt, three days later, that Jack was in the country and that Captain Raynour was at 63 Woodley Gardens.

"Renée is too, too wonderful," she said, pensively. "It is really very disgusting."

CHAPTER XIV.

ONE of the Amelias (the Amelia who had told Cecilia all she knew or suspected with regard to Jack and the serpent-like Mrs. Buckingham) had a very keen scent for a scandal, considering that she was young. Amelia's husband indulged her by bringing home all he heard in the city and clubland, which was no inconsiderable amount, as he knew Cassilis quite well. For when Sir John Bexley wrote and told him that Jack was at home, looking very sick and much shaken, Cassilis put his head on one side and looked like an owl at dusk when a mouse squeaks.

"What is it?" he asked. "Is it another?"

So far as he could learn, it was not another. There was no sign of another.

The truth is that, clever and keen-scented as he was, he had not the least notion of what it must be till he ran into George Raynour in Pall Mall. He slapped his thigh and said, "By Jove, I have it," before he shook hands with the soldier.

"You're looking a bit off," said the K. C.

"I'm practically dead," replied Raynour. "If you've any one to get rid of, send 'em to the West Coast."

"You'll come and lunch with me," said Cassilis, for here was a chance. Moreover, he had a kind heart, and Raynour, though he had picked up a little, still looked dreadful.

As a result of that lunch, one of the Amelias wrote to Cecilia before the girl had seen Jack, and told her all about everything. As it was Cassilis's theory, she was not far out. She only added a few frills and folderols to the problem.

"She has quarrelled with Mr. Bexley. I hear that is *known*. There was a terrible scene between them. It was *jealousy*. It seems that she had another *friend* (it makes me sick to think of such things, as I have to meet her), and that Mr. Bexley found it out. There was a fight, it seems, but where it was no one seems to know. Of course this isn't public yet: it is only known to those of us who are by way of hearing things (I go out very much now, you know). Darling, isn't it dreadful? Life in London is unspeakable in some ways. I can't tell you how bad it is. I saw her yesterday. She showed no sign of sin or shame. Charlie says I *must* be civil, as poor Mr. Buckingham is very kind to him and puts many things in his way. I

have to do what my husband says, but it goes against the *grain*. I suppose you will see Mr. Bexley soon. He was her victim!

"I wouldn't have written this if you hadn't told me I was to, for of course I oughtn't to. I know that. But isn't it all dreadful?"

She added a postscript.

"Burn this at once."

Cecilia had never said she was to write, but, nevertheless, whether Amelia spoke the truth of the affair or not, she was glad that Jack Bexley, the victim, was at home again, and likely to stay there for the winter, if Sir John was right. He rode over to throw out cheerful hints that Jack was himself again, and meant to hunt, rather than be hunted.

"I'm very glad he's at home again," said Cecilia. They shook hands without more words. Sir John was a very able man still in the diplomacies of life, though, as he knew well, he had shown to no advantage in freeing Jack from the dens and pits of London town. He was admirable with Jack when the boy turned up, looking white and worn, and weighing two stone less than he had done six months ago.

"Very glad to see you, my boy," said his father, beaming, and without any of that sympathy which makes the young loathe their elders. "Cuh-

huntin' is about over, and they say there are a fine lot of foxes. You'll find Springtide fit for anything."

Lady Bexley, who had known nothing of the shepherd of Park Lane, and had suspected nothing in her innocent heart but chorus girls, of whom she had an early Victorian horror, was as fussy as a hen with her one big duckling, and moaned over the fact that Jack's clothes didn't fit him. She suggested her universal remedy, but Jack, being sere in mind, was not amenable, and refused plasters and cod-liver oil with contumely. Lady Bexley read the article on consumption in an antiquated Family Doctor, and asked her own local man what he thought of Jack. The doctor guffawed, and was as rude as if he were as clever as Abernethy. He, too, was rather early Victorian, but he had a name for cleverness of a sort. He knew Lady Bexley's constitution, so she said. It was the constitution of an amiable and very healthy cow, and presented no difficulties to any tyro in medicine.

"He must have been in love," said Doctor Willett, with his hearty guffaw. "Don't be afraid of consumption. I'll warrant the lad against that."

She was comforted, and when Jack put on seven pounds in a fortnight, in spite of hard riding, she smiled again, and went over to Ashwood to talk

about him with Cecilia. Some folks in the neighbourhood found that Jack palled on them, but Cecilia was very sympathetic, and behaved like a daughter to the old lady, so much so, indeed, that she had a great idea, and imparted it to Sir John.

"I shouldn't mind in the least if Jack married Cecilia, my dear," she said, with her ample hands folded in her ample lap. "I really shouldn't."

Sir John raised his eyebrows.

"That's an idea," he said, benevolently. Some men would have said that with half an eye she might have seen that Cecilia meant to do it, and that with a quarter of an eye she might have observed that it had been in the mind of Jack's father for years.

But — "That's an idea," said Sir John. "I don't think I should mind much myself."

"To put it that way is not kind to such a sweet girl," said his wife.

"Put it how you like, my dear," said Sir John, "but do not put it too crudely to Jack. He's ready to shy at any woman."

"I will say nothing to him, John. He has been over there twice already."

Sir John mused, and, half-forgetting his wife was there, presently remarked that Jack had got over the measles! Now by "the measles," he meant

Mrs. Buckingham, though the lady was certainly more virulent than measles.

"Measles, John," said his wife, in great astonishment, "why, that was ten years ago! And what have measles to do with his marrying Cecilia?"

"Did I say measles, my dear?" exclaimed her husband. "Why, I must have been dreaming."

"So I should think," replied Lady Bexley. "It is far more to the point that he has been vaccinated twice with much success."

Sir John did not inquire why it was far more to the point, and went out riding with Jack. Father and son talked more naturally and easily than they had done since Mrs. Buckingham had come on the

SCENE

"He's getting over it," said his father. "I think I might throw out a hint that I'd like to see him married."

He threw it out.

"Not for a long time, sir," said Jack, sternly.

"I hope it won't be too long, the way you ride to hounds," said Sir John. "You wouldn't break your neck, and leave me without an heir, old boy! There are heaps of nice girls about."

He sighed to think of them. He had got to the age when nice girls did not mind kissing him in public. It is a very trying time for a healthy and

handsome old gentleman who has always been popular with the women.

"I don't think there are so many in this neighbourhood," said Jack. "Or anywhere else, for that matter."

"You're hard to please. There's Emmy Wade and Mary Westwood, to mention two right off."

"I can't abide either of 'em," said his son.

"They'd have you, Jack."

Jack knew it, and made faces.

"And there's Ethel Grimshaw. I don't think she'd have you, my boy."

Jack guffawed, as Miss Grimshaw was sixty.

"And there's Cissy Clarendon. I don't believe she'd have you, either. Oh, there are lots of them. I think you could mostly take your pick."

Jack subsided into silence. It was odd, to say the least of it, that he should not be pleased to hear that Cissy probably wouldn't have him.

"But she's too good for me, I know," said the boy. He thought of the lost letters. If he ever did think of marrying, it was awful to know that some enemy might get hold of them. He put himself in the position of Cissy's husband, and saw her reading them!

"What a fool I've been!"

His father was satisfied to see him so silent, for he knew he was thinking of Cissy.

"He's kickin' himself now about the other lady," said wise Sir John. "But he'll get over that. How I kicked myself the first time it happened!"

He thought of that first time and sighed.

Two days later poor Jack had still greater reason to kick himself, for Renée wrote to him. It was by no means a love-letter. Neither was it in any way an *apologia pro vita sua*. It was simply a peremptory demand that her letters should be found and returned to her. Her boy lover had become, at any rate for the time being, no one in particular. His only importance since George Raynour had returned lay in the fact that she had written him letters which he had not burnt and had not returned. Worse than that, he had lost them. Raynour had a savage pleasant hour when he told her of Jack's visit and his discovery that the letters were gone. He rubbed the fact into her with the bitterest and most insulting glee.

"You wouldn't let me read 'em, only the words 'my darling,'" said Raynour, "and now some one (Lady Billy for choice, as I told you and him) will be sellin' 'em to your lord and master. I hope she will."

She sat white and silent, and had no word of

answer for his insults. That he was capable of insult and brutality gave him his hold on her. She domineered over Jack and James Buckingham, but her nature was the nature of the woman who kisses the hand that smites her. She would have slaved faithfully for a lower-class blackguard who beat her, if her lot had been cast in the lower classes. It gave her an acute pleasure to be handled brutally, and no one but Raynour had ever discovered it, or had the nature which fitted hers.

"You're very cruel to me," she whimpered. Her attitude would have amazed all who knew her.

"Don't you deserve it?" he asked, savagely.

"Yes, I do, George, I know I do. But I'm in awful distress —"

"I'm glad you can feel something, damn you," said Raynour, languidly. "When you meet Lady Billy, see if she's got 'em. She'll sell 'em. I hope she'll bleed you. If she sells 'em to Jimmy, you will have to run away with me."

He laughed scornfully.

"And then you won't be Lady This or That, and you'll lose Park Lane and your horses and carriages and all that Jam and Biscuits endowed you with, except a thousand a year."

A thousand a year was settled on her when Buckingham married her. It paid for half her clothes.

"I can't live on it," she screamed. "You know I can't. But how can Billy have them? I don't believe she would take them. She's very fond of me."

She believed that. And indeed it was true enough. Next to money, Billy loved her best of all things.

When she left Raynour, who, in answer to her caresses, actually refused to kiss her, and told her to go to the devil, she wrote to Jack and sent for Lady Billy.

"If she has them, she knows everything, and if she hasn't, it will be giving myself away to be anxious," thought Renée. It was an exceedingly unpleasant situation. Nevertheless, Renée was quite aware that Billy must know enough even without the letters. The disagreeable thing was that she might have to acknowledge that she knew enough.

"What is it, darling?" asked the thief, when she came in.

"I'm in trouble," said Renée, sullenly, "and you may as well know some of it first as last."

She turned to Billy and searched her with her eyes.

"Are you really fond of me, Billy?" she demanded.

"Darling, you know I am," said her friend.
"How can you ask such a question?"

"I believe you are, on the whole," said Renée.
"I've never been nasty to you, and have always acted as your friend. If you could do me a bad turn, I'd never believe in any one again."

"I just couldn't, darling," said Billy. "Tell me why you say such things."

Renée paused and looked away from her.

"Mr. Bexley and I aren't friends any more —" she began.

"Oh, why?"

"He — he went too far," said Renée, implying that she hadn't gone far by any means.

"Tell me —"

"I can't. That's enough," said Renée, shortly.
"And I said I'd never see him again. But I wrote a good deal to him, innocent letters enough, but I should, of course, hate any one else to see them."

Billy quite understood that, and she nodded. Her eyes were innocent when Renée looked into them.

"I was really quite fond of the boy," she went on. "I thought I had discovered a man who could really be a friend."

"I've often told you none of 'em can," said Billy.
"But —"

"He's lost the letters, he says."

"Dear me," said Billy, "do you believe him? Perhaps he's angry with you."

"He is," said Renée, "and now I hate him. But I *must* have the letters back."

"Have you got his?"

"I burnt them; they were silly toward the last," said Renée. She affected to yawn, and never felt less like yawning.

For an instant Lady Billy had the desire to say, "I have them and will give them to you. I took them because I saw them in an open drawer," but when the words were on her lips she choked them down.

"I very nearly did it," she thought, and imputed the choked desire unto herself as righteousness.

"What can I do?" she asked.

"I don't know. I only spoke because I'm in such distress about it. Suppose they got into the hands of some enemy of mine or my husband's."

"I wouldn't suppose it," said Billy. "It's much more likely that Mr. Bexley hopes still to induce you —"

"Oh," said Renée.

"It would be all right then."

Renée looked at her.

"I know they're stolen," she snapped.

Lady Billy started, but, after all, it was natural enough that she should.

"How can you know that?"

"I'll have to tell you, I suppose," said Renée, reluctantly. "My old friend (and he really is a *friend*) George Raynour is back."

This was the first that Billy had heard of it, and she stared.

"Why, I thought he was in Nigeria —"

"He got ill and was invalided. You remember, I let him 63 Woodley Gardens?"

Billy certainly remembered that, and nodded.

"The very night that Mr. Bexley got my letter declining to see him again, Captain Raynour came to London and went straight to the Gardens —"

A man would have said, "The devil!" Lady Billy said, "Good heavens!"

"Captain Raynour was ill, very ill, and half-crazy. He got it into his head that the flat was still his, and, having a key, he walked slap in on Mr. Bexley, who was packing up in a rage. They had a row, of course, and George Raynour said the flat was his. He had a high fever, you know, and Jack—Mr. Bexley—said he could have it, and flung out with his portmanteau, swearing. But he came back next morning and wanted something he had left. George told him to take it and go, and he

went to the desk and found that the letters were gone!"

"Did Captain Raynour know what letters they were?"

"Of course not," said Renée, fretfully. "But he wrote and told me about it, and was very unreasonable about the flat being let, as if I could keep it empty when Mrs. Simpson is so poor."

Billy's eyes were not wholly innocent then, and Renée went on hastily.

"He said the boy was as white as a ghost about the letters having gone, and said they had been stolen."

"Some of the servants at the flat," said Billy, with conviction.

"Captain Raynour says he doesn't believe that; he trusts them thoroughly."

"It's impossible to trust servants," said Billy, "and you know —"

She paused.

"Know what?"

"I never trusted Captain Raynour."

Renée turned on her.

"And why, pray?"

"You know I never liked him much, darling. He never had any manners."

"His manners are good enough for me," said

Renée, tartly. She spoke truly enough. She held her tongue for a moment, and then burst out:

"Well, he doesn't like you. He says *you* took the letters!"

Billy was perfectly admirable.

"How characteristic," she said, calmly. "*Now* I'm sure that *he* took them himself. Why, I haven't been in the flat for ever so long!"

"You were there a week ago with me," said Renée, suspiciously.

"Oh, so I was," replied Billy. "However, I'm sure you don't believe him. Who told him I was there?"

"I suppose Mr. Bexley did."

Billy shook her head.

"It's a mystery to me. How could I come up in their talk, I should like to know, if they only quarrelled?"

That was something of a poser, but Renée said:

"There's your photograph there."

"So there is. However, I didn't take the letters, darling, I assure you."

Renée shook her head.

"You give me your word of honour, dear?"

"My word of honour," said Billy. "I wish I had them. They'd be safe, at any rate, from doing *you* any harm."

She meant that, and it warmed her little soul to think that she did.

"Your Captain Raynour has them," she added. Renée shook her head irritably.

"It's a horrid mess. I hate men."

"If you hated them half as much as I do Arthur, you'd have nothing to do with them," said Billy.

CHAPTER XV.

WHEN Jack received that letter from Renée he knew that he hadn't got out of it easy, after all. Whatever kind of a woman she was, it was his honour that she shouldn't suffer through him. An older man might have said that such a creature might fend for herself. But Jack was very young, and his natural desire to be utterly honourable and to play the game had not been turned aside even by bitterness. Renée must have her letters, for it was his fault that they were not burned. If they had been stolen they would be used either against her or against him. That is to say, they probably had a price.

"And I shall have to pay it," said Jack. That is to say, Sir John would have to pay it. His son flinched at this, for as things went they were not rich. Renée spent as much on herself in a year as the baronet's income.

He answered Renée's note shortly. His letter had no beginning and no end but his signature. It gave him infinite difficulty, for he remembered what he

used to write with more shame than grief. He said that the letters must have been stolen, and if they had been they would probably be for sale. He would pay for them with his last farthing. He could say no more, and he said no more. Mrs. Buckingham must put up with it. It gave him a certain satisfaction to think that it was something to put up with, and he was ashamed of the satisfaction.

But next day, as he was young, and as the weather was fine and open, he went hunting, and after the optimistic fashion of man he said things would be all right. If Billy had stolen the letters she could do nothing with them. Affairs would blow over; he was getting out of shoal water. He put the matter out of his mind, and felt perceptibly cleaner. In a few days he might feel good enough to touch Cecilia's hand again. His thoughts turned toward the girl constantly. He was astounded at the purity of his own heart when he saw her, not understanding that his purity depended so amazingly on hers. She was wise but pure of heart, and did not tire her head and sit at her window with sex in her eyes like the other woman. Cecilia was a green meadow after meads of burning marl. She was pleasant to his scorched feet. He made a

little shrine for her, and believed she was as ignorant as she was pure.

And yet what right had he to love her? He declared that he had none, and then made himself wretched because she would never love him and never forgive him if she knew. Yet after years she might relent. She understood his pathetic eyes when they met.

"Oh, I can forgive him anything," she said. Through the delicate Amelia, who so hated gossip, she knew what she had to forgive. But she felt assured that it was all over between him and the Scarlet Person of Park Lane.

"I'm glad you're back again," she said, lightly.

"I — I'm glad, too," said the abashed lover.

"I'm very glad!"

He looked sad and wan and worn, Cecilia thought.

"He's been through dreadful things. Oh, I hate her!"

She looked sweet and calm, thought Jack. How little these dear girls knew of dreadful things!

"You're going to hunt a bit this year," said Cecilia.

"I mean to," replied Jack, with an air of desperate resolve, "I must —"

He meant that he must live for other things than he had done.

"You must?"

She understood.

Jack stammered that he meant he wanted to. How could such a child understand that he wanted to forget! But she smiled and patted Springtide, and he straightway forgot and smiled somewhat less appealingly, and presently he laughed and said "Ciss" again, and she was happy. He rode in a dream. The past, if not past, was passing. He saw a clear dawn, or so he thought. It was a strange world that held two such creatures as Renée and Cecilia. Yet the world held fire and snow. His heart was pure again; he lifted his eyes to heaven. The poor chap even went to church with Lady Bexley and heard sleepy old Vokes read an eloquent sapless sermon, which was new when the king was a youth. But there was some good stained glass in the church at Charteris Towers, and the choir was not bad, and the organist had some passion for music in him. There was something in religion, thought Jack, when the sunlight through colour and the sound of the organ touched his heart. He walked home soberly, and with one ear heard his mother prattle. He answered her vaguely, but she had his dear, strong arm, and was satisfied. How won-

derful it always was to her that she had so fine a boy, and one who loved her so. Through Jack the old lady believed in all miracles, and was consoled for not understanding Sir John. Sir John was perhaps glad not to be understood. But he, too, was happy, seeing that Jack was out of the wood. As the days passed, Jack believed that more and more.

But then, of course, the deluge began to threaten.

It was almost Christmas, and a three days' frost had yielded to a sudden southerly wind. The hearts of all hunting men were very gay; for folks had been prophesying a six weeks' frost, which would have been very sad indeed, seeing that hunting is so necessary to the stability of England. It is as important as cricket and Eton and the upper classes.

The meet that day was at young Lord Lashmere's place, which made one angle of an equilateral triangle with Charteris and Ashwood. This young lord was the one who wanted to marry Cecilia, much to the gratification of Tom Clarendon. It was with equal gratification, however, that he told every one that she wouldn't have him. It is sometimes even more a matter of pride to refuse a noble lord entrance into one's family than to take him in, and, as Tom Clarendon said, young Lashmere was more or less of an ass. He was more of an ass when he was compared with such men as Sir John Bexley,

and less, perhaps, when compared with Jack. But then Jack was even more handsome than ever after his affair with Mrs. Buckingham, and though Lashmere had had several affairs, not one of them had managed to make him passably good-looking. He showed no signs of getting married, and his sister, who was fifteen years his senior, and though a virgin as wicked as she could be, kept house for him. She was as ugly as a barbed-wire fence, but very popular, and made her brother's house as lively a place as there was in the county. It is, of course, understood that no one can make any house in town or out of it so lively as Lady Juliana did if she is too particular. Relying on her own virtue, which was founded on the impregnable rock of ugliness, she invited any one she took a fancy to without a word being said. That is why the deluge came then and there to Jack.

The very first person he saw as he got off his horse was Lady Billy.

"Oh, I wonder if she has those letters," said poor Jack, with all the joy knocked out of him. He had come to Lashmere Place with his father, and had really chattered somewhat like his old boyish self. His jaw fell and the light went out of his eyes as he shook hands with Lady Billy.

In the old days of a few months back they had

been "Billy" and "Jack" to each other, for Lady Billy wouldn't be thirty-five if she could help it, and had insisted on being "pals." In his heart the boy liked her; for she was amusing enough, and he had been infinitely interested in the peculiarity of her ideas about money. But now she reminded him of Renée, and he remembered what that poor devil Raynour had said. "She's got 'em, and you'll soon see it," was what Raynour said. Jack was as nervous as a cat.

"How d'ye do, Lady Billy," he murmured.

"Oh, I'm all right, and how are you?" she asked almost jovially. She looked very well and quite as handsome as her paint, which she wore admirably. "Goin' strong?"

Jack said or mumbled that he was going very strong.

"I didn't expect to see you," he said, calmly enough.

"Oh, Lady Juliana's quite a pal of mine, and great fun," said Lady Billy. "We cottoned to each other right off, for she understands me when I'm wicked, and I understand her when she's witty. Most of these poor dears don't."

Jack never did; though Lady Billy was very good to him in the matter of wit.

"Oh, ah," said Jack.

"You've not seen Renée lately?" asked Billy.

Jack's face showed things as plainly as a map four miles to the inch. The map was coloured, too.

"Ah, no," he muttered, "not lately, ah, I've not been in town, you know. It's a fine day, Lady Billy."

It was a fine hunting day, and a bit wet under foot with a sprinkle of rain. Billy did not hunt.

"Oh, is it?" she asked. "It's a fine muddy day. It was much nicer yesterday."

"It was a frost," said Jack, with a stare.

"I love frosts," said Billy, "and that's lucky, isn't it?"

She didn't say why it was lucky, and Jack stared again.

"Oh, mostly everything's a frost, and I bear up," explained Billy.

"I'll tell Renée I saw you," she added. "I saw her three days ago. She's looking very sweet, too lovely for anything."

"Humph," said Jack, uneasily. He stared over her head, and was obviously trying to get away. Billy saw it, and resented it.

"Do you know Captain Raynour, by the way?" she asked.

Jack caught Lady Juliana's eye.

"Yes," he said, as he walked off. He wasn't

wise enough to be nice to poor greedy Billy for all that Raynour had said. And yet he had not meant to be nasty. It was simply a matter of nerves. But Lady Billy had none, and didn't understand them.

"I'll pay him out for that," she thought. To speak the truth, she was extremely anxious to be on something less than the old footing, though she did not acknowledge it to herself.

"For two pins I'd give these letters to Arthur," she said. But she knew that she would never do that. If she ever *did* quarrel with Jack Bexley she would make him suffer. She made herself cross about it already, and knew deep in her mind the mean little game she was playing with what stood for her soul. She followed Jack, and then found herself face to face with Sir John Bexley and Cecilia Clarendon, whom she had not met. She was as amiable to Sir John as if she was his dearest friend.

"How jolly to see you. I've just been havin' a talk with Mr. Bexley," she cried. "You see I knew him so well that I feel I almost know you better."

"I'm so glad," said Sir John. "I understand. I'm simple and Jack's complex. I can be read at sight. Lady Juliana says I'm a darlin' because I'm so simple."

Lady Billy chuckled.

"Lady Ju's as simple as both of us."

Cecilia knew who she was. Amelia had told her a great deal about her. But the chief thing against Billy was she was a friend of Mrs. Buckingham's. Old Tom Clarendon came rolling in among them, and greeted Lady Billy tempestuously. He had met her once in town.

"Don't you know my gal? Cissy, this is Lady Wilhelmina Rayley."

Cecilia bowed her spine as if half an inch would crack it, and all her moral principles as well. She never uttered a word, and her eyes were as cold as ice.

"The little beast," said Lady Billy.

Before she could say something bitter, the huntsmen and hounds made a move, and Lady Billy was out of it. She was left with old Tom and Lady Juliana. She noticed that Jack and Cecilia went off together.

"I wonder," said Billy.

She told the old boy that his daughter was very pretty.

"As pretty as they're made, and as good, and as clever as the very devil," said the old chap. "She's a wonder, Lady Wilhelmina. She's my secretary, and I write a great deal about farming and drain-

age, and she knows as much as I do about it, and she's a good cook and a rippin' housekeeper and knows five languages, and has brains enough to be a Cabinet minister and more nowadays, for I've a poor opinion of them. As an agricultural country we're goin' to the dogs, ain't we, Lady Juliana?"

Lady Ju said that if the country was going to the dogs, the Cabinet must shortly go to the country.

"Not them," said Tom. "They know better, though I've a poor opinion of 'em. Well, I'll be gettin' home. I've a lot of writin' to do."

When he was gone Lady Juliana told Billy all about him, and about Cecilia being supposed very likely to marry Jack.

"I thought so at once," cried Billy. "But I don't think she approves of me."

"No more do I," said her hostess. "But I can't bear any one I approve of in the house. They are so dull. I more or less approve of Lashmere, but he's dull to extinction when he's with good people. He wanted to marry Cissy himself, but I've made up my mind that he sha'n't marry till I can find some one to dilute him. Cissy's very good, horribly good, and would accentuate his vices."

Lady Billy wrote to Renée and told her the news about Jack. She thought it would annoy her, and

it would certainly be news. What is the use of knowing something disagreeable if it is not imparted to those whom it will annoy? Like every talebearer, Billy had a warm sense of virtue all down her spine. She added in a postscript, "By the way, he was not at all nice to me. I wish you'd really tell me why you quarrelled with him, for I used to like him very much, and the nervous way he wouldn't look at me, but only down his nose or over my head, made me quite unhappy."

Her second postscript was:

"Could you lend me twenty pounds? Lady Juliana had rooked me horribly at bridge. I shall swear off playing for more than a farthing a hundred."

As a matter of fact she had done very well out of Lady Juliana and Lady Juliana's guests, for she could have written a book on the game, and all the Lashmeres put together weren't her match. She had done very well all that year, and had invested quite a sum of money, but of course she got greedier and greedier. And as greed grows judgment usually fails. She began to speculate just because her solicitor had advised her to have nothing to do with the companies of a certain financier then very much in evidence. He was a man with the mind of a kite and the presence of a pork butcher, and much in request with the nobility and gentry. Lady Billy

had met him once, and had loathed him even as she hung on his ponderous lips, watching for pearls of great price to fall into her open hand. She had great hopes of bringing off the Grand Slam with a thousand pounds at stake. She believed in Mr. Pottinger Playfair (that was the financier's name) as Lady Bexley believed in mustard plasters and the Church of England.

"I shall be able to tell old Ridge that he's an ass," said Lady Billy.

But old Ridge, who was her solicitor, was no ass, by any means.

"If I bring it off I'll give Renée the letters," said Billy.

How warmly virtuous poor Billy felt as she said this! It was, perhaps, possible that ten thousand a year would have made her as good as a good bishop, or even as a good archbishop. At any rate she felt that money was the one thing needful: lacking that she lacked all things. If that thousand pounds came home bringing ten with it!

It is almost needless to say that it didn't. Mr. Pottinger Playfair came to limitless and irremediable grief, and all the nobility and gentry who had sullied their fingers in his boiling pot ended by scalding them and bringing nothing out. Indeed, there was in the end nothing but bankruptcy for

many of them in company with the great cook. He smashed for a million and three-quarters, with assets £679,000, and was prosecuted for fraud. A determined jury was, with difficulty, prevented by a reluctant judge from bringing him in guilty. His lordship found no evidence to prove anything but the facts that Pottinger Playfair was a scoundrel, and that the nobility and gentry then in court were loathsome and greedy fools. Mr. Playfair went out of court with no stain on his character. For it is understood that charcoal won't make a black mark on a nigger. The nobility and gentry went away, and one or two of them hanged themselves amid the suppressed applause of those who hadn't got in with Playfair. Mr. Playfair retired to his wife's estate, and became immensely popular. All this is very pleasant to think on, as Pepys might have said, and it made business for journalists. But the one poor journalist who got her clothes by praising clothes in weekly articles was in most awful despair when the news came.

It came when she was having breakfast (at twelve o'clock) with her virtuous and amiable husband. Arthur Rayley was always as sore-headed at breakfast, unless he was away from home, as if he had chronic gouty indigestion. His greeting to his wife was "Humph" when she came down, and

hers was a stare. She opened the paper first, and disturbed all the equanimity he possessed by giving a horrid squeak, and then falling over in an unmistakable faint fit. She went down on the floor with a thump, and Lord Arthur upset his coffee over his trousers and swore horribly.

"What the devil's wrong with you?" he roared. But Billy answered nothing, not even a moan, and he rang the bell till its peremptory message brought a servant running. They kept two, and only kept them by being behindhand with their wages.

"Here's your mistress fainted! Oh, the devil!" said Rayley. "What do you do in such cases? Damnation! I've scalded myself!"

Billy moaned and opened her eyes.

"What — what is it?" she murmured. "Oh—"

She went off again, but just as Rayley began to think he had better go for a doctor she really came to.

"Here, I say, damn it," said Rayley, "what's wrong with you, Billy?"

Billy sat up and leant against a chair.

"I'll be all right in a moment," she whispered. But she was still as white as paper.

"Here, get brandy, damn it," said the anxious husband. "I say, you've scared me, old girl."

The servant brought the brandy, and Rayley, who

had generous notions about spirits, if he was generous about nothing else, made his wife drink enough to choke herself with. But after a gasp or two it really did her good, and her heart began to do its work. The colour stole back into her face.

"You'll be all right. I'll change my trousers," said Rayley.

He left the room and Billy got into a chair.

"That will do, Emmett," said Lady Billy, "I shall be all right now. Give me the paper."

It was lying on the floor torn and crumpled, but when Emmett left the room, Billy smoothed it out with trembling hands, and read the Great Failure column right through.

"A thousand pounds, a thousand pounds," she groaned. But the door opened and Rayley came in again.

"What was it bowled you over?" he asked. "Anything in the paper?"

Billy hastened to reply.

"No. I felt very queer before I came down. But I'll be all right now. Give me some coffee."

While she drank it Rayley took the paper.

"By Jove, here's old Pottinger Playfair come a mucker. Did you see it?"

"I saw nothing," said his wife; "as I opened the paper I seemed to go blind."

Rayley had no suspicions.

"But you knew him, didn't you?"

"I met him once, I think," said Billy.

"This'll hit a lot of our crowd very hard," said Rayley, viciously. "Serve 'em right. There's no decency left among 'em. A bounder like Playfair! Good God, think of it! I hope my governor will suffer for it. He says he's too poor to give me a cent, and he had Playfair down to see him. I expected to find the old chap in a prospectus any day. I'll go to the club and hear what's up and who's down."

Many were down that day, and Rayley loved to hear of it. But among those who were down none were hit harder than his wife, though she had only lost a thousand pounds. When her husband went away, she crawled into the drawing-room and lay on a sofa till late in the afternoon. She felt dreadfully ill, but was too wretched to think about it.

"If only I'd sold out before," she moaned.

Now instead of having something near twenty thousand pounds, she was down to nine. This seemed to her miserly soul the very point of destitution, and it was horrible to think of it. That thousand had taken her such pains and misery to get, and now it was gone like a coin through the crack of the floor.

"It will take me years to get it back!"

To work and beg and borrow and scheme and plot merely to get so much back was dreadful. To have exhausted the resources of her mean skill to get more would have been an infinite pleasure to her.

"I can't bear it," she said, as she stared at the blank wall. "I can't bear it. A thousand pounds, a thousand pounds!"

"If poor old Billy pegs out I'll marry Kitty," was what Rayley said as he went down to the club to talk about the Playfair crash.

It does not in the least matter in this place who Kitty was.

While Rayley walked and thought of Kitty, Lady Billy was reading Renée's letters to Jack.

"These letters are disgraceful," she said. She put them under her pillow. "They are worth more than a thousand pounds."

Decidedly they were worth more, either to Renée or Jack, or to Jimmy Buckingham.

"I can't bear to lose the money," she moaned.

Rayley came in to see her in the afternoon.

"I'm glad you're all right again," he said, "but you had better keep quiet for a 'it."

"I can't do more than stay in bed," said his wife.

"I'll stay at home, if you like," suggested Rayley.

Billy smiled rather bitterly.

"Certainly not, I'm not ill enough for that, I hope," she said, somewhat tartly.

"Of course not," said her husband. "I was to dine with Lennox, you know."

"Dine with him," said Billy.

He also dined with Kitty Lennox.

Billy read the letters all the evening.

CHAPTER XVI.

It took Jack a month to get over his meeting with Lady Billy, but when he had got over it, he made up his mind that he was going to marry Cecilia Clarendon, or live single for ever afterward. When Cissy saw this, and she saw it coming as soon as any one, she was almost as happy as if there had never been a Mrs. Buckingham. Indeed, it is possible that she was happier; for she felt that she had in some way rescued him from a dreadful fate. She would have denied that it gave her any pleasure to think that she had taken him away from another woman, for it is understood that no really good girl can have a pleasure of that kind and be quite good. Nevertheless, if not a pleasure, it was a satisfaction; and the distinction was satisfactory as so many fine ones are. Lady Billy was inventing one for herself. It would be wrong to blackmail Jack Bexley, but to make him pay for being so wicked as to have received such letters was something very different. Probably a human being is best defined denotatively as one who

makes excuses for himself that won't do for other people.

But Jack made no excuses now. He looked for an opportunity to tell Cissy that he loved her. She gave him exactly ten thousand, by which one means that he had all she could offer. He saw none of them, and blundered and balked and refused like a fool of a hunter at every little fence. Sir John saw the game, and chuckled. Even old Tom Clarendon saw it and guffawed, making Cecilia, usually a lily, into a rose of thorns, so that she refused to type something about some Cloaca Maxima or main drainage scheme of his. Lady Bexley saw nothing beyond her nose, but doddered on amiably, hanging on Jack's rare words. For the more he fell in love the less he had to say. When he got with Cecilia, the ready little virgin was as inaccessible to him, as he believed, as the side of a house. He blushed and hummed and hawed and made remarks about the wind and the snow and the sleet and the state of the roads at long intervals. Any one but a clever girl in love would have said he was an impossible donkey. But Cecilia loved him dearly, and thought him impossibly handsome (as he was) and a Hercules (as he almost was) and really underneath quite clever (which he certainly was not).

"I'll — I'll do it to-morrow," said Jack. And he didn't do it to-morrow, or the day after, and in his despair he began to think that winter was a bad time to propose. Perhaps it required sunlight and roses, or starry evenings with balmy winds, such as he had read of in love-stories, in which the hero had the noblest stock of admirable words right to his tongue. And the result of all his worrying was that January melted slushily into February, and February was thinking of freezing into March before he found the commonest words in the commonest situation to do what he might have done anywhere or any time months before. As a matter of fact he proposed to Cissy on the windy platform of Ashwood railway station in the last days of a particularly horrid February. For Cissy was going up to London to spend a week with an aunt, and in desperation she had thrown out a hint that she was very likely to see a cousin of hers who was an officer in a Goorkha regiment, who had been mentioned three times in despatches and had the D. S. O. to decorate his courageous heart with.

"I like him very much," said the young puss. "Oh, and he is brave!"

She said that at Ashwood the day before she went, and Jack had a sleepless night over the Goorkha chap, who was engaged to an Amelia (not

the one who wrote to Cissy about Mrs. Buckingham). He cursed the hero! If it hadn't been for his mother he might have had a kit-bag of D. S. O.'s to throw in Cissy's lap! And a hero always had words to say when he wanted to talk to girls. If he hadn't, he wasn't a hero. Jack got up early, and wandered about the garden in whirling leaves and horrid slush, and after breakfast (one cup of coffee only, so that Lady Bexley said, "Oh, dear! oh, dear!") he got his horse and rode madly over to the station, and got there half an hour before train-time. It was late, of course, as it was on one of the English Southern Lines, and Jack kicked his cold heels about a colder lot of bricks till Cissy came all by herself. She saw Jack before he saw her, and she coloured handsomely. When he did see her, he went as white as so brown a boy could, and shook hands with her dumbly.

"So you've come to see me off, or is it that you've come to meet some one else?" said Cissy, laughing. Then she put on a grave air, for she was quick as lightning, and understood.

"Oh, ah," said Jack. It was not intelligible, but she was very intelligent.

"Yes?"

"I—I thought I'd like to see you off," mumbled the poor lover.

He marched up and down the draughty station until the train was signalled and the bell rang. Then he stopped and looked unutterably wretched. Cissy paid no attention whatever. She was just a little cross. However, when they saw the train Cissy relented and put her hand on his arm.

"There's the train, Jack."

His jaw fell, and then he flushed.

"Oh, Cissy —" he said, and stopped.

"Yes, Jack," — was it coming? No, yes, no!

"Cissy, I say, I've wanted to say somethin' to you this long time. But I couldn't. I say, Cissy, will you marry me?"

It was out at last, and the sky didn't fall any more than it had been doing for a month. That is to say, it went on raining just as usual, and there were touches of sleet in the rain. But now Jack could talk.

"Oh, do. I say, I know I'm not clever like you, or good, but I do love you like anything, and I always shall. Ciss, I believe you know I do, for I always have done, always from the time I was a kid. Oh, Ciss!"

And Cissy held out her hand. He grasped it, and hurt her in the most delightful manner. His agitation was obvious and extreme, and much more than complimentary. The weather changed for

Cissy, and the leaden sky was as blue as one could wish and the winds were balmy and Jack's words were good and right and admirable as any hero's, and she thought he had never, never looked so fine when it seemed as if he would eat her up.

"Oh, Jack," said Cissy. It was she who had no words. And yet what folly to say that. Her "Oh, Jack" (hadn't poor abandoned Renée said it) was equal to a choir of birds singing, "Hymen, Hymen," in a tropic grove. It meant so much, everything, all the world. These were indeed words, wonderful, warm, spacious! They embraced and loved him, and he was happy.

"Oh, Ciss!"

The train came in and hurled them apart. He was crazy, delirious, and saw things through mists of glory. The gale sang of Eden: the rain was musical as the birds. He put her in her carriage.

"Do you — do you love me?" he stammered.

She bent her head, and he saw the roses in her very neck.

"Oh, yes, dear Jack!"

The whistle blew harshly, the beast of an engine gave a scream and she was gone, wondering why he hadn't got into the carriage with her and gone up to London.

He rode home through wonderland, though the

ways of Sussex were miry and the rain bitter cold, and the wind like a scourge, for he had achieved something very marvellous and had brought down a white bird out of the heavens to his earth, become heavenly. Cecilia, the sweetest, the wonder, who had aforesometimes been so sour, the proud now humble, was to be his own, his very own! In spite of the other birds, perhaps not white ones, who had come for the merest whistling, or even without it, his heart this day was pure. He felt so extraordinarily good that he wondered at his own cleaned heart. He triumphed humbly. What a fine thing was life, after all, and he—oh, he was the luckiest, most marvellously lucky, of all dear mortals on the earth. He prayed and sang and loved the very earth itself and the beasts of the field, and did not grudge the poorest love, for, since Cecilia's love was his, he had treasures to spare for every one. His face glowed: he was a young knight, the past was past and the present was here, of the future he might be worthy. It was poor Jack's hour.

And it came out of the fact that the dear and wise Cecilia had spread her nets not in vain, in spite of all the other fowlers. She knew of them, oh, even of Molly! There's the wonder of it, for it is understood that good girls are so good that they forgive hardly even when repentance wallows

in ashes, and she had no guarantee that Jack repented. But Cissy said these other women were devils, beasts, what one likes to call them. The fact was Cecilia had him, and the other fowlers had him not.

But that she knew about Molly, and the results thereof, is a hard thing to swallow. Perhaps Cecilia was not good, but only wise. Yet her heart was sore at times. Things might have gone better. Still — there we are!

Jack kept his secret radiantly for a radiant hour or so, and it only gradually dawned on his dear mother and dearer father that their son was indeed radiant, that his blue eyes shone, and that he was the colour of a rose.

"Confound it, the boy's too good-lookin'," said Sir John.

Then Jack burst, so to speak. It would have taken an amazing dam of indifference on Sir John's part to keep back the flood in Jack's heart.

"Oh, governor —"

"My boy!"

"Oh, sir, Cissy —"

"By Gad, you say so?" roared his dad, swift as any falcon. "You don't say so?"

"Cissy —"

"I knew it, I knew it," said Sir John.

Jack's eyes opened wide.

"Oh, governor, you said she wouldn't —"

"Tut, tut, so I did," said Sir John. "It must have been gout in me. Why, you two were made for each other."

Jack knew that. It was arranged before the foundations of the world.

"I'm — I'm very happy," said the boy.

"Damme, so am I," said the father. "Shake hands, where is she?"

"In London," said Jack. He explained that he had spoken eloquent words on a golden platform just outside heaven, and that Cecilia had come out to hear them. If he didn't put it that way, Sir John so interpreted his beautiful shyness and the glow of him.

"I'll tell your mother," said Sir John, and when he had done so Lady Bexley folded her mighty son in her own mighty arms and wept hugely down his neck and his waistcoat.

"Oh, my boy, I shall lose you!"

"What rot," said Jack.

But for the moment Lady Bexley hated the fair girl who had snared her boy. She sobbed, and Jack's eyes were wet.

"Dearest mother!"

Sir John nearly wept, too, but smoked instead,

and lighted a cigar and let it out, and lighted another and hurled it into the grate, damning the American-Spanish war as he did so.

"There's not been a cigar fit to smoke since," said Sir John, brazenly.

On the whole, it was a very fine world. Lady Bexley knew nothing about Molly and Renée, and Sir John was optimist enough to think Renée was quite dead, and Jack forgot all about every one but Cecilia. Letters — letters, oh, well they were nothing: they didn't enter his mind. Cissy filled it, he was full of the goddess. His mother snuffled through lunch, his father ate for the three, for Jack trifled with less beef than Cissy took in a mouthful. She might be pale, but she had an appetite, as all good girls ought to have.

The two male creatures rode over to Tom Clarendon's in the afternoon, and old Tom roared and then giggled and guffawed and slapped his own thigh and Jack's knee till that knee was as red as if Lady Bexley had been at it with a mustard plaster.

"By the holy poker," said Tom, "it's amazin' how things turn out. On my soul to think, John, of the times you and I had, rakin' round London, and now to think of my Cissy and your boy here

makin' a match of it. Well, well, it's a strange world, as my poor dear wife used to say."

"So it is," said Sir John, with a twinkle in his eye; "but it's all right on the whole."

"That's what I told the poor dear," said old Tom. "Well, well —"

He sighed and then looked up.

"Makes me feel old, though. Damn it, Jack, what d'ye mean by growin' up and comin' stealin' my gal? I tell you what, I'll pay you out. John, I shall resign my seat, and we'll put Jack in!"

"Oh, Lord," said Jack.

"What's the objection?" asked Clarendon, in a roar.

"Oh, I'm such an ass, you know, sir," said Jack.

"Then you're qualified first time," said the old boy. "The House is full of asses. But it'll be something for you to do. And the boy my gal chooses can't be an ass, Jack. She's as clever as they are made. You'll want no private secretary with her for a wife. She can gut a blue book as easily as a gamekeeper can a rabbit, and what she don't know about any special subject no one can teach her. You shall take up drains, Jack!"

"Where?" asked Jack.

"Take 'em up in the House," said Tom, as if he was suggesting new sanitation for Westminster.

"I'll give you the facts, me and Cissy. I say, John, everythin' seems to fit in beautiful!"

Ah, so it did. To oblige the father of the heavenly Cecilia, Jack would have worked in a drain. He was a dear, splendid, good old chap, thought Jack.

They fixed everything up there and then. Jack and Cissy were to live at Charteris Dean, which had been a dower-house when Charteris was a really big estate. Cissy was to have so much and Jack so much. Cissy's dower was not very big, for Clarendon was poor enough, but altogether they would have enough to begin on.

"And I'll take the Chiltern Hundreds at Easter," said Tom, rubbing his hands. "I insist that Jack shall do something."

It wasn't what the boy wanted, but after all he couldn't be a soldier or a sailor now. And what did the House matter if Cissy was by his hearth.

"Rippin' good old chap, is Tom," said Sir John, as they rode back.

"First-class, sir," said Jack.

So he was, and "everythin' was rippin' and first-class" in Jack's mind.

For this was love, real love, true love, the real, genuine article without any mistake whatever! And to think that he had thought another kind of pas-

sion was love. It was amazing: Jack was surprised every moment of the day at the splendour, the humility, the faith and trust of his emotions. Now he had no undercurrent of fear in him. Cecilia was an angel.

It is probable she was wise enough to remain so, for if any woman has the gift of appearing angelic, it depends on her wisdom whether she keeps it up or not. If she had to confess that she knew all about Mrs. Buckingham, such a confession might be made quite creditable to her, unlikely as that may seem. Even those letters, which, of course, would have horrified her far more than they did Lady Billy (though Lady Billy was very virtuous and coldly faithful), might have been (ay, and would have been) forged into another link to subdue her humble Hercules. If she had had them in her hands she would have read one, skipped some more, and burnt the lot, as a faithful widow would if she found documents discreditable to her dead husband. But the only thing she would have thought dead was Jack's past. It would have been dead, too. That is the virtue of such wise faith as this wise virgin had.

It is a pity that Jack didn't know this. And yet, on thinking about it, the whole art of being a good wife to such a dear ass as Jack must depend on the

wife's wisdom, if she can conceal it, and Jack distrusted wisdom like any other man. He heard old Tom Clarendon bellow of her cleverness, and the bellow went in one ear and out of the other. He attributed cleverness to her, in spite of this, but only as a pleasing ornament. If he had known that she was wise, wary, cautious, far-seeing, able, and absolutely shrewd (which shrewdness is the capability of weighing him and others with a glance out of half-shut eyes), he would have been terrified as if a hare had run at him with the bellow of a bull. And if he had suspected that she knew one-quarter of what she did about him, or man in general and man's ways, his jaw would have dropped. He would have thought her little better than Renée. That's the wonder of it: an amazing piece of folly is man, and a male centenarian is too often but a babe in arms to such a she child as Cecilia.

And yet if Jack had known, now she had him securely, she could have read the letters, and (as is said above) have read one of them with wise calm, though with disgust. It might have saved him and his father very much alarm and trouble. Why, Cissy, for all her hardness and brutality to that poor emotional physical creature, Renée, would not now have troubled to say she was a beast. Cecilia grew up wonderfully, though not like a hollow

gourd. No one could have discovered that she had seeds within by shaking her. Her father knew as little of her as he had done of her sage mother. Even Sir John — but there even he would have acknowledged he could only say that she was wise. He had his prejudices, too, and might have thought it not nice for Cecilia to know so much. But if it had saved a thousand pounds! Money was, on the whole, scarce enough at Charteris, and old Tom was not as rich as folks thought. And a cool thousand began to be in jeopardy.

Lady Billy wanted her thousand back. Mr. Pottinger Playfair never knew all he had done as he contemplated building new cottages on his wife's property. Billy meant having it back from some one, and it was obvious that the easiest prey of all was Renée's one-time lover. To sell them to Jimmy Buckingham would have been horrid. Billy said so, and really felt it. To sell them to Renée would be to put an end to drawing on Renée. And besides, Billy loved her, even had a kind of passion for her. There was no one but Jack, and when Cassilis told her that Jack was going to be married to old Tom Clarendon's daughter Cecilia, she saw her chance of making him pay without implicating Renée in the matter.

"I would send them to her," said Billy, "I mean I would say I would to Jack."

She had a week's shame about it, but when any one's soul is steeped in the desire of money shame abides not in it. The shock she received when the news of Playfair's *débâcle* came to her she never quite got over. It made her a more hardened woman than she had been before: it brutalized her. She could have clawed Playfair's face like any Parisian revolutionary harridan. She had attended his trial, and his acquittal seemed to her the most monstrous thing she ever heard of, for she supplemented every inconclusive piece of evidence with that thousand pounds of hers.

Now she began to write letters to Jack to see what they would look like. They looked horrible, and she knew it. Whatever she wrote looked bald and ghastly. And then there was the fact that they looked exactly like blackmail, and blackmail was a crime. She spent the best part of a month before she made any sort of a plan, and even then she achieved nothing very notable. Still it hid the worst. She did not offer to sell the letters; she did not even say she had them. On the whole, it must be admitted it was rather clever of her. No one who was an absolute fool could have invented the notion. She wrote a letter to Jack, saying that she

was in great financial distress, and would he lend her a thousand pounds. There was no more in the letter but the bald request for money. But before she sent it she got hold of a typewriting machine, and wrote on a slip of paper :

"Lady Billy Rayley has the letters you lost. I *know* this.

"A FRIEND."

The machine wrote Jack's address, too, and he got the letter just a month before the marriage, which was by no means being delayed. It was set for the fourteenth of June.

"I'll send my letter just before he is to get married," said Billy, "but perhaps he may come and see me without my sending it at all. It's very clever of me. Renée won't come in it at all. I wouldn't hurt her for worlds."

But she fired a train, and had no notion of the explosives at the end of it. She went out and lunched with Renée with a calm and hopeful mind. She was perfectly admirable and very amusing.

CHAPTER XVII.

ALL men, and Jack was no exception, are miserable optimists, except those who commit suicide. He could build a fool's paradise with any one, and now a few words in type brought him suddenly to the ground. He picked himself up sadly, but, though he would have said he was in despair, there was really no despair in him. So long as Cecilia knew nothing, things would come all right. They must, and they would. If this damnable note spoke the truth, the worst was only paying for the letters. He knew well enough that his father would find the money necessary. He knew that even if Sir John declined (an impossible notion) he could raise it himself. Nevertheless, it was a horrid business, and a very loathsome one, for any young man in love to have to face just on the eve of his wedding.

He read the note at breakfast, and Sir John spotted at once that something was wrong. His first notion was that Jack was in debt secretly, and

that this was something peremptory in the way of a bill. Jack went white, and gritted his teeth. He put the paper in the envelope again, and put both into his pocketbook.

"It's not a bill," said Sir John to himself.

"Please pass the marmalade," said Jack. He went on with his breakfast, but tasted nothing. Lady Bexley said he wasn't looking well, and the boy declared, with a frown, that he was all right.

"Something is very wrong," thought Sir John, "but the boy's a good plucked 'un. I hope to the Lord that it isn't the lady again."

He understood only too well that a man's mistresses have a way of turning up about the time of their lover's marriage. He wondered what Cecilia would think if she knew about Jack and Mrs. Buckingham.

"I wouldn't have anything upset the little girl for a million," he thought.

"I think you should take a pill," said Lady Bexley, who had been talking all the while.

"I — a pill!" said Sir John.

"No, Jack should take one," said Lady Bexley, "or perhaps two."

Jack declined; and when breakfast was over he went out into the garden, and walked up and down for an hour in a secluded path. In the meanwhile

Sir John smoked cigars in the library, though, as a rule, he did not smoke till after lunch.

"The devil," said the thoughtful father. He went on thinking.

"He'll go up to town," he said at last. "By Jove, I'll go myself and have a talk with Cassilis, and get him to talk to Jack."

He anticipated Jack by a few minutes by going into the hall and calling to his wife that he had just remembered he had to go to London. Jack heard him.

"Come up with me," said his father, "or have you to see Cissy to-day?"

Jack said that he had not to see Cissy, and the two went up to town by the 10.40 A. M. During the journey Jack sat in silence looking out of the window, while his father didn't read the *Times* he held in his hands. They parted at Charing Cross.

"I shall go back by the five o'clock train," said Sir John.

"I'll come by that if I can, sir," said Jack. He went to his club, and sat down in a quiet room. But, though he required more time to think, he had really made up his mind what to do first. He remembered what Captain Raynour had said.

"He said she had 'em," said Jack. "He may

have some idea as to who the person is who wrote this thing."

He sent a note by messenger to Raynour at Woodley Gardens.

"Will you come and see me for a few minutes, or, if we shall not be disturbed, can I come and see you?"

In half an hour an answer came back that Raynour was too seedy to come out, but would be glad to see him at once.

So Jack walked through the Green Park and St. James's to the Gardens. He found Raynour sitting in an armchair by the window, and looking ill enough in all conscience, though he was in some ways better than he had been the night they first met.

"Damn glad to see you, old chap," said Raynour, holding out his hand. He smiled in an odd sort of deprecating way.

"Thank you, sir," said Jack. He could not help treating the soldier as though he were much his senior.

"Call me Raynour," said his host, "if you don't think me too much of a rotter."

"What rot," said Jack, uneasily. He had a horrible sense of the fact that to live as Raynour was

living was dreadful. And he had done it himself!

"But — but how are you?"

Raynour shook his head.

"I'm very uppish and downish," he said, "but I think I'm better. I'm crazy, of course, still crazy."

He saw Jack was nervous, and knew the reason.

"It's all right," he said, "no one will come."

He added:

"Not in town to-day, you know."

That was Renée, of course. Raynour went on:

"I'm dashed glad to see you. You see you understand, and I've no pals left. They're all dead, I suppose, and my regiment is in South Africa. I'll never see them again. My service is done —"

Jack said he hoped not.

"Done," said Raynour, pathetically, "quite done. But don't let's talk about me. I'm glad you thought you'd come and see me. Damn odd situation, isn't it? You're sure you don't think me a rotter, old chap?"

There was something infinitely sad and broken about the man, and in his eyes was fever or a gleam of insanity. Jack's heart was touched.

"Oh, you've done so much, and now —" he broke out with.

"Done much, oh, no," replied Raynour, "but

I might have done. I used to be ambitious. Then *she* came along. I say, you never see her now?"

He spoke harshly and with bright, fierce eyes.

"No," said Jack, with a frown.

Raynour sank back in his chair.

"Of course not. I'm crazy. Heard anythin' of those letters?"

Jack took his pocketbook out and handed him the letter he received that morning.

"I got that at breakfast."

Raynour cackled as he read it.

"What did I tell you? I said Billy had 'em. I know her. And you can't guess who 'A Friend' is?"

Jack shook his head, and Raynour smiled bitterly.

"You can't?"

Jack looked surprised.

"How can I? Can you?"

Raynour burst into laughter.

"It's easy, old chap; of course I can guess. Lady Billy sent it herself."

"What for?" shouted Jack.

"I know she did. I'm sure of it," said Raynour.

"Now what's her game? I had it just now, but my brain went off the rails. I'll tell you in a minute. I know the cat too well."

He stared blankly at Jack for a minute. Then his eyes brightened.

"I have it. It's as clear as mud, old chap. What's the good of her havin' 'em unless some one knows she has 'em? That's the first step for greedy Billy. You're her mark. She don't like you. She as good as said so here the other day when she and the other came together."

It annoyed Jack to hear that Lady Billy didn't like him.

"I was always nice enough to her," he said, crossly.

"I know her. She's a — well, she's Billy," said Raynour. "I know her beastly mean little heart like a book. The other has told me lots about her. There's only two in the world she likes, and one's herself and the other's Mrs. B."

"But that don't explain writin' like that," urged Jack, who by no means followed the acute mind of the other man. "What good does it do?"

"She scares you, that's it," said Raynour, "and, though you don't say anythin' about it, she knows you're goin' to be married. Her game — here, I'll tell you her game!"

He got up and walked about the room.

"I'll tell you. She'll borrow money of you. That's it. I've got it, safe as houses."

If she *had* sent the anonymous letter, he was right, said Jack. Yes, that looked very like the truth. He stared at Raynour hopelessly.

"It looks like it."

"Old chap, it's the truth. I'll swear it," said Raynour. "I know these damned women. A good 'un is a sealed book to me, but I can read the bad 'uns like a map."

He stood and stared out of the window.

"Blackmail's a nasty business, but she's clever. You'll have to pay up and look pleasant. Renée swears Billy hasn't got 'em, but I know better."

"What am I to do?" said Jack, helplessly.

"What I told you before. Sit tight. Let her ask for money first. She'll ask. Then you go and see her. She'll let out then that she's got somethin' that you wouldn't like all the girls you know to read."

Jack shivered.

"But she could get ever so much more out of others than out of me," he urged.

"Who?"

"Well, Mr. Buckingham," said Jack, looking at the carpet.

Raynour shrugged his shoulders.

"Even the worst of 'em have some decent points.

I'll lay a thou she'd rather burn 'em than give her pal away. I tell you I know her."

It looked as if he did. Raynour insisted on it.

"Sit tight, old chap, you'll see."

He went back to his chair and sat down again. Once or twice he looked as if he were going to say something, but he did not speak for some time.

"I'll wait," said Jack. "It's very beastly."

He got up and shook hands with Raynour. Then Raynour giggled oddly and said:

"I didn't tell you I tried to get 'em from her!"

Jack started.

"You did? What did she say?"

"Said I was mad. I said I *knew* she had 'em, but it was no go. I offered twenty pounds to let me have a look at 'em."

He did not look at Jack as he spoke.

"Why?" whispered Jack. "Because you wanted to know if she had 'em?"

Raynour laughed horribly.

"No, old chap, but because I wanted to read 'em, to see what it was she wrote to another chap when I was rottin' out yonder!"

The other chap shivered.

"Good God!" he said.

"Oh, I'm mad, I know," said Raynour, brutally.

"Ain't it odd, old chap? I like you I swear. I

ain't the least bit jealous of you. But I'd give an arm to read those letters to the other chap that's not you in some way I can't make out."

He puzzled over the thing, and stared at Jack strangely.

"Devilish odd, ain't it?" he said, as he puzzled. "I like you amazin'ly, but you ain't the man she wrote to in some way. I suppose I'm crazy. I shall cut her damn throat some day."

He bent his head and repeated his last words in a far-away whisper, "Cut her damn throat some day."

"I — I must go," said Jack.

"No, no, don't," cried Raynour. "Stop and have lunch with me, old chap. I'd like you to."

"I — I have to meet my father," mumbled Jack. But he shook hands with Raynour.

"Won't you chuck it?" he asked.

"I can't," said Raynour. "I can't get out."

He went with Jack to the door.

"You sit tight, and she'll write to you. Tell me if she does, will you?"

"Yes," said Jack.

Raynour caught him by the arm and looked at him with imploring eyes.

"I say, old chap, if you get 'em — if you get 'em —"

"Yes?" said Jack, "yes —"

"If you get 'em — will you let me have a look at 'em?"

There was madness in the man's eyes, in their bestial beseeching appeal.

"Good God!" said Jack. "Oh, I couldn't, I couldn't!"

Raynour collapsed suddenly.

"No, no, don't. I say I *am* a rotter. Good-bye!"

Jack went out, and Raynour called after him:

"Do you think I'm an *awful* rotter, old chap?"

"No, no," said Jack, in a choking voice.

As he went down-stairs, he heard Raynour laugh. Then Raynour called to him again.

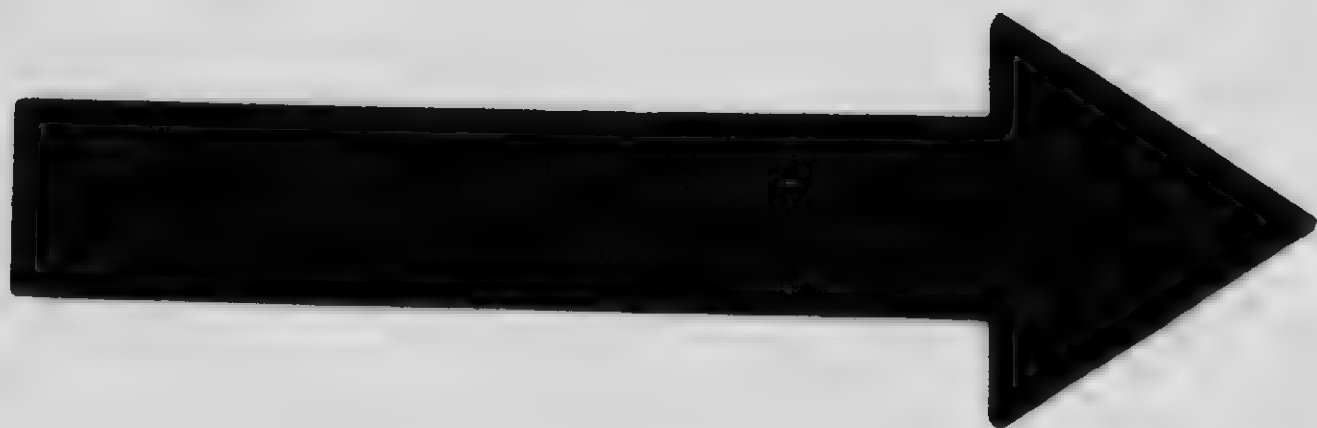
"I say, if she writes, as I say she will, come and tell me, won't you? I'll help you."

He did not say how he could help, but Jack was helpless.

"I'll tell you," said Jack.

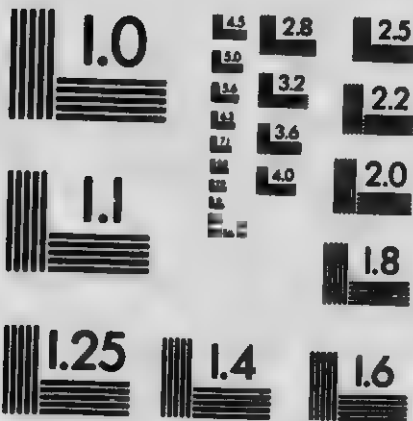
But when Raynour got back into the flat, he laughed again. He walked up and down the room and slapped his thigh.

"By the Lord, I have it," said he. "I'll get 'em, I'll get em. Billy will scare easy. Oh, I know her."



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He laughed uproariously, and then checked himself and shook his head.

"Go easy, my boy," he said to himself. "Steady on, old chap! Now, George Raynour, keep quiet, you fool, or you'll give yourself away."

He rubbed his eyes hard and stood lost in thought. Then he grinned again, and, going into the bedroom, opened a kit-bag and took a revolver out. He saw that it worked easy, and then polished it with a silk handkerchief. He handled it with an odd and dangerous sort of pleasure, and spoke to it as men will to things when they are not quite sane.

"You nearly killed me out yonder, so you did," he said. "I suppose you will in the end, you sleek beast. But we'll read those letters yet. Poor Bexley, what a child he is!"

He put the revolver away in a drawer, and sat down by the window and took up a morning paper which he had thrown down when Jack came in. A paragraph caught his eye, and he frowned. The next minute he laughed again.

"Good Jimmy, poor old Jimmy, here's to your success, old chap. The Upper House, eh? So it's settled at last. With a wife like yours, you deserve it."

He threw the paper down.

"He's not such a very bad sort, after all," said Raynour. "I'll tell Renée so when she comes. It will make her sick."

But she was delighted, and so was poor Buckingham, for it was really settled at last that he was to be made a peer when the next list of honours came out. Renée was reasonably nice to him, and they agreed to agree a little better in the future. Buckingham absolutely apologized for everything he had said when they had had the great quarrel in the carriage coming home from the house of the Conservative whip, and he withdrew his remark about Renée's mother. This had naturally rankled more in Renée's mind than the suspicion that she had infringed the Seventh Commandment. For she really loved her mother in her way, and she had never pretended to herself for a moment that she either loved or owed any duty to her husband. It was not in her nature to pretend anything of the kind.

"Well, we can be decent to each other, James," said Mrs. Buckingham, "and of course I'm very much pleased that you should be honoured in this way. And you'll give mother a better house?"

Buckingham would have given any one anything at that moment.

"Of course, my dear," he said, quite heartily.

He waited almost humbly to see if she would make any kind of affectionate overture to him. But it was the last thing she thought of, and he sighed and went away. Yet, as he drove down to the city, he forgot all about her, and thought only of himself.

"I've got there," said Jimmy Buckingham. "It's cost me best part of a hundred thousand, but I've got there. Oh, yes, I've got there."

He repeated that a hundred times in the day. And when his friends came in and congratulated him, he was as happy as any child. He asked them what title they thought he should take, for, unfortunately, he understood there was a Duke or Earl or something of Buckingham, and Lord Buckingham would have sounded very well, wouldn't it?

His pals said they would think of the question, and let him know.

"The Prime Minister was very nice to me," said Buckingham, proudly. "Oh, yes, — well, think of it and send me a line."

He made lists of names of places, and thought it a pity his only big piece of landed property was at a village called Smitham.

"I might have foreseen this," said Buckingham. "It is a pity I did not buy the other place at Ulls-

water. Lord Ullswater would have sounded very well. I wonder whether it's for sale now."

He rang up a big firm of estate agents to find out, and they said they thought it could be got at a price, and would let him know.

He sat thinking how in a little while he might see in the papers, "Lord Ullswater said," or that Lord and Lady Ullswater did this and that.

"I'll speak to Sadler," said "Lord Ullswater." He called in his manager, and told him that when the thing was done, he meant to make every one in his employ a present, a week's pay to the working people and a month's to the staff.

"It will cost a pretty penny," said Buckingham, "but we can afford it."

"Certainly, my lord," said the manager, obsequiously.

Buckingham smiled and waved his hand.

"Not yet, Mr. Wadley, not yet. That will come in time, in time. By the way, what about that special offer of glucose from Botz and Bleichroder?"

"I understand, my lord, that it's a very poor quality," said Mr. Wadley. "Mr. Smith thinks it not up to our standard."

Buckingham looked annoyed.

"You don't say so! Tell them we won't have

it. That we can't afford to use anything but the best. Or, stay, ask them if they will take ten per cent. less."

And while Mr. Wadley was asking Botz and Bleichroder if they would take ten per cent. less, Jimmy Buckingham wrote "Lord Smitham" and "Lord Ullswater" on a sheet of paper.

"I've got there at last," said Jimmy Buckingham.

CHAPTER XVIII.

PERHAPS Sir John got a little more satisfaction out of his visit than Jack did, for Cassilis told him all he knew about Raynour. What he really knew was little enough, but the King's Counsel added his inferences and deductions (which were mainly right) and made out a comforting case. Jack's nose had been put out of joint with the fair peeress-to-be by the return of an o'd lover.

"I tell you the lady is a fair scorcher," said Cassilis, descending to vulgar and commonplace slang, "and I've not the least doubt about it. Raynour's the man, and Jack's clear enough. You'll find his trouble is money, of course. You say he's not in debt. But he ran with a bad lot for six months, and he must have been bled. As he's goin' to be married, you'd better go into finance with him. Then you'll see."

"I don't believe the boy owes a hundred pounds. I allow him five hundred a year," said Bexley.

"Pooh!" replied Cassilis, as he looked at him pityingly. "To think how the country changes a man! What's five hundred to a lad running the

pace with a woman like Mrs. B.? I dare say she cost him that in flowers."

However that might be, the Raynour explanation eased Sir John's mind, and he went back home again more comforted, even though Jack did not come in the same train. If Mrs. Buckingham had a new (or old) lover, she wouldn't want Jack, and things would go all right.

"I'll speak to Jack about money," he thought.

He did speak to him the next morning, and Jack said honestly that he owed no more than he could square up with his next half-year's allowance.

"You can have it now," said his father, who was as pleased as Punch to hear this. He was also pleased to see that Jack's mind was easier, for the incurable optimist, having slept on the situation, was full of hope that nothing would happen.

"Thank you, sir, there's no hurry," said Jack. He rode over to Ashwood, and as he rode the world grew brighter, and Mrs. Buckingham went into the background, and Billy (if she really had the letters) would never use them, and it was a rippin' good world "'pon my word."

Looking at everything, it seemed that everything was all right and that every one was satisfied. Sir John was happy to be able to write to Cassilis that Jack had got over his worry and didn't owe money.

Cassilis was satisfied because he felt sure that something more serious than money was the trouble, and he loved the scent of scandal better even than fees. Mrs. Buckingham was satisfied because she was going to be "Lady Ull-water;" and because Raynour was better in health and treated her outrageously. Buckingham was satisfied because he had "got there," and because jam had gone up and glucose gone down. Lady Billy was satisfied because she saw her thousand pounds on the way back. Raynour was satisfied because he was mad and no one knew it. And Cecilia was as happy as she could be.

It's a devil of a thing when everything seems to go right! In this particular case, it might be that the universal satisfaction would end in universal grief, for, with such conflicting claims on the good nature of Providence, no verdict would satisfy all claimants.

But Jack at least cared for nothing. The marriage-day was approaching. He said it was a long time when it was a month; that it was a very long time when it was a fortnight; that it was an eternity when only seven days divided him from happiness. He forgot Renée, forgot Billy, forgot the letters, forgot everything but Cissy, and went about looking idiotically and anxiously happy. Lady

Bexley made arrangements which Sir John unmade, and Lady Bexley made other arrangements, equally kind and full of stupidity, which Cecilia unmade. Sir John, however, was generous, and kissed his wife and said that everything was all right, and Lady Bexley wept on his shoulder and said he reminded her of her youth. And did he think that Jack was well?

"I thought he was very pale, dear," she said.
"I think an iron pill or some steel drops —"

Heavens, how delightful it all was to her! Jack took the pills and gave them to the chickens, who swallowed them voraciously, without seeming a penny the worse. He accepted a large number of mustard leaves from her to use on the honeymoon. Though Cecilia had learnt to make proper mustard plasters in the true Bexley manner, it was, of course, possible that real mustard might run out in Switzerland, where they were going for the wedding-trip, and, as Lady Bexley said, French mustard was absolutely useless in an emergency.

"The proper thing is to use mustard which can raise a blister, and take it off before it does," she said.

Jack had sometimes complained that she hadn't taken it off before it did. He rather looked forward to the time when he could be free of mustard

plaster. Cecilia believed he was as healthy as a horse.

"She also believes I am good," sighed Jack. "Oh, but I will be! What a terrible escape I've had. If I'd been found out, and she had been divorced, I should have had to marry her!"

The fact is, he hated Renée now, for, since passion had ceased to blind his eyes, even his stupidity was capable of seeing her outrageous and lamentable selfishness. He was unutterably glad that he was passion-free from such a creature. He looked on Cecilia with amazement and with humbleness. The dear darling was so sweet, and such a child. She knew nothing but love. And she loved him. In a few more days —

Five days before the marriage he got a letter from Billy. Luckily for his father, it came by the second post, and Sir Joan did not see his son read it. If he had seen him, Cassilis, with all his explanations, would not have been able to console him. For Jack went very white.

"Oh, I've been a fool," he said.

For this was the letter.

"DEAR MR. BEXLEY:—I hear you are going to be married, and I hope, I do hope, that you will be happy. I wish that I was in the state of mind

in which I could enjoy the happiness of an old *friend*, but things have been dreadful with us lately, oh, more dreadful than you can think. I've been *very* ill (I fainted dead away a little while ago), and we are so pressed for money that I don't know where to turn. Mrs. B. cannot help me (I don't know why, but she can't, she says), and in my distress I've thought of you in your happiness. We used to be *such* friends, didn't we? (though I do call you Mr. Bexley now) and I wonder if you can help me. I would have helped you in the old days, when we (you and I and Renée) were so much together, and, if I ever get a chance to *help* you or *save* you trouble, I will. But now I want some money, and we can't give any security for it, and my poor husband is ill in bed with worry. Can you lend me a thousand pounds for a few months? I know it is a dreadful thing to ask, but I have to ask some one, and I beg you to do it, if you can. It will save us *all* from the greatest trouble, for I don't mind telling you *in confidence* that I am threatened with the revelation of some private affairs by some unscrupulous people unless I pay them at once. And it is on account of *others* that I must pay.

"Yours in the greatest distress,

"WILHELMINA RAYLEY.

"P. S. My best congratulations to the sweet girl who is to be your wife. I may be down at Lady Juliana's this week, and I *might* see her."

It must be confessed it was no fool's letter, and that it would have been difficult to construct one more innocent to the uninstructed, yet carrying so many threats to its recipient.

"Raynour was right," said Jack, "he was right. I must go up and see him at once."

If there was an unhappier man in the county, the poor fellow was to be pitied. But Jack said bitterly that it served him right. He was a poor moralist, but honest and ignorant.

Before he went up to town, he sent a telegram to George Raynour, asking for an answer to his club. Then he paced the platform, and tried to see a way through his trouble. There seemed no way, and yet he was to be married that very week. If Lady Billy had the letters, as seemed most probable, she could, he believed, break off his engagement to Cecilia even at the last moment. That was all he knew of the girl he loved. It was all that most people knew of her. Only his father knew better, and even Sir John did not really understand her.

The train came in and he got into his carriage.

A stranger tried to talk politics with him, and Jack, who found politics rot, and who looked forward with horror to replacing his father-in-law in the House, hadn't a word to say, even though the offensive stranger was a bitter Radical. He heard the man prate with as much attention as he would have given to wisdom, and carried no more and no less away with him. How could such things happen? How was it that a woman like Lady Billy could descend so low? And yet he remembered how she had robbed a poor waiter. George Raynour was probably right. Any one who could do what he had seen her do was capable of the lowest blackmail.

What a clever chap Raynour was! He had foretold this. It was a strange thing that he and Raynour were almost friends. The poor devil! He must be a little mad. It was dreadful to think how Renée held him. Ah, if he refused to lend this money to Lady Billy, Renée might suffer. It was his duty to protect her, even now. He was sure of that.

But if Cissy heard of it! He was in an agony; the sweat broke out on his forehead. Damn this prating fellow in the corner! Why didn't he talk to the other man who was in the carriage? What

would Cissy say? "My God," he thought, "if she throws me over now!"

He heard the politician say many things, and heard them with a feeling of increasing irritation.

The stranger spoke of fiscal policy, of the army, of the navy, of India. He was a fluent, pestilential person, and delighted to hear himself speak. He believed Jack was listening, and of a sudden Jack burst out furiously.

"Shut up and talk to some one else," roared Jack. The silent man in the corner laughed, and the politician fell back, with his mouth open.

"Sir," he said.

And Jack glared at him.

"Damn you, don't talk to me," said the boy.

No one said another word, for Jack looked dangerous. The train came to London Bridge, and the politician hastened to escape. At Charing Cross Jack took a cab and drove to his club, where he found an answer from Raynour. He drove on to Woodley Gardens.

"I wonder what he will say! He must be right," he thought. As he drove, he came suddenly to a very wise conclusion, and was much happier.

"If there's no other way, I'll make a clean breast of it to the governor," he said.

In another minute he was with Raynour, who

had been walking up and down the room in a furious state of excitement. He knew what Jack's wire meant. His first words were:

"She wrote to you? She wrote to you?"

His eyes blazed, and there was a spot of red in each sallow sunken cheek. The colour, though it was not a healthy one, made him look better. He was not so thin, either.

"I got her letter this morning," replied Jack. He fumbled for it, and handed it to the soldier, who snatched it from his hand and read it eagerly. He turned to Jack with a smile and a nod. It seemed to make him happier.

"What did I tell you?" he asked, triumphantly. Jack stood there and said nothing.

"Sit down," said Raynour. He walked the floor, holding the letter in his hand. He laughed every now and again, and then began to talk.

"I told you she wrote that thing in type-script. And now she wants a thousand. Did she ever borrow from you?"

"Not much," said Jack.

"She did from me, poor as I am," said Raynour. "She owes me twenty pounds now. If I don't die till I'm paid — Oh, I know her. What will you do? Here, I tell you. Now don't you speak, old chap. Let me do the talking. I sit here day in

and day out, and only when *she* comes do I see a soul but Dickson. I loathe the club. Where was I? Oh, she's got you, don't you see! Is it true you're goin' to be married?"

Jack nodded wretchedly, and Raynour put his hand on his shoulder.

"You buck up, old chap. You marry a good girl, and leave these damn women alone in the future. I know 'em and you don't. I've lived and you haven't. You're beginnin' and I'm endin'. Look here, I've a plan. I thought it out. There's two ways, perhaps three."

He looked at Jack steadily.

"One way is —"

He paused.

"Yes," said Jack.

"Tell her to go to hell," said Raynour, with his head on one side as he looked down on the boy, — "tell her to go to hell, old chap."

"What will she do?" asked Jack. "She might sell —"

"Sell 'em to some one else, my boy. Let her. Who'll buy 'em if it ain't my lady or my lord (he's goin' to be one, you know)? Let her sell 'em."

"But it's my duty," began Jack.

"To do what?"

"To save her."

"Why, why?"

"Oh, because, you know," said Jack, in great distress. "You know I ought to."

Raynour laughed savagely.

"I don't. You think it's a point of honour?"

Jack did think so and nodded.

"To her?"

Jack shook his head irritably. And yet, and yet —

"No, by God," he shouted, in sudden anger, "to myself."

Raynour clapped him on the back.

"You're all right," he said. "I like that. You owe her nothin', and, if you do, I'll pay her. Old chap, you're a man."

Jack flushed uneasily.

"But even for her sake —"

"Oh, let her be," said Raynour. "If you won't let her suffer, there's only the other way. And it's to pay. Oh, yes, there's another, but I won't tell you that yet. Can you raise the money?"

Jack knew that his father would mortgage Charteris to the last farthing to clear him of such an entanglement, if it had to be done.

"I believe I can," he groaned.

"Poor old chap," said Raynour. "I'll try my way. Now look here, Bexley, am I an ass, d'ye think, or do I know these women?"

"You seem to," said poor Jack. "But —"

"You look here," said Raynour. "I told you she'd try to stick you. Now you send her a wire that you'll call at four this afternoon."

"And you —"

Raynour chuckled.

"I'll go there first, old chap, and tell her one or two things. I think I can scare her. Will you do it?"

"Yes," said Jack, who was utterly helpless. "Of course, if you think it's any good."

"It may be all right," said the other. He walked the room again. He read Lady Billy's letter through, and handed it back to Jack.

"You buck up, you're all right," said Raynour. "Oh, I wish I was you, old chap. I wonder how it is you and I are almost pals. Ain't it strange? I could tell you lots of things."

He was evidently thinking of Renée.

"That night I came," he said. "And you, and then *she* came! It's the damnedest world. I say, she and I had a row yesterday. She's to be my lady, and poor old Jimmy (not half a bad sort, really), he's to be my Lord Ullswater, she says. I told her I'd cut her throat some day, or put a bullet through her. So I shall. I know it. I say,

old chap, she says any one might read those letters she wrote you — ”

Jack dropped his eyes on the carpet.

“Ye-es,” he said. He swallowed the truth and told a good lie. “That’s true,” he said.

“You’re a damn good sort,” said Raynour. “I wish I was half as good. I don’t believe you.”

Jack said never a word.

“I told her what I thought of her, and she laughed,” said Raynour. “That’s her sort. I oughtn’t to say what I do, but I have to. Let’s go out and send that telegram. Poor Billy will be anxious.”

He cackled with bitter merriment, but walked soberly enough to the post-office.

“Say four o’clock,” said Raynour. He watched Jack write the telegram and saw it paid for.

“You can come to my place after you’ve seen her,” said he. “If I’ve done nothing, you can promise her the money.”

But Jack was in a flurry of mind, and did not know where he was.

“But if she don’t mention the letters?” he asked.

“She won’t,” said Raynour, “but you must ask if you are to have security or something worth a thousand pounds. That’ll show you understand.”

They parted outside the post-office.

"I'll get 'em first," said Raynour. And half an hour later he sent another telegram in Jack's name, saying that he would call at three instead of four.

"I'll get 'em if I have to choke her," said Raynour. "I want to read what she was writin' to him while she was writin' to me out in the land of the curse of God."

And at twenty minutes to three he took a hansom and drove to Wilton Crescent.

"I'll make 'em both sit up," said Raynour, grinning. He was white as a ghost, but his hand didn't shake, and he looked dangerous.

There was a chance, as of course he knew, that Lady Billy might not be at home, but he calculated and calculated rightly on her being on the lookout for Jack Bexley as soon as ever the poor lad got her letter. As a matter of fact, she stayed in that day on purpose, for she was sure that Jack would come up to town when he received it. When the first and authentic telegram came, she told Emmett that a gentleman would call at four, and that she was at home to no one else. When the second and unauthentic wire came, she altered the hour from four to three, and sat down to wait.

Billy waited and waited, not without nervousness, for this was the first time she had ever gone so far

as actual blackmail. She was not ignorant that her husband had been guilty of it on more than one occasion. But he was a man, and she was a woman, who, since the shock of Playfair's bankruptcy, had by no means her ancient nerve. Nevertheless, she was desperate, as desperate in her way as Raynour was in his, for her very soul was wrapped in the thought of money. She played over the game, as she waited, and considered how they could come to a question of sale and exchange.

"He will think me —"

Ah, he would think her one of the lowest. She flushed uneasily: there was something within her that saved her from the utter baseness of entire self-satisfaction.

And the hour drew on. She opened and shut her desk, which contained the packet of letters. She handled them again and again, and sometimes looked at a few words.

"He'll be here now!"

A few minutes later there was a ring at the front door. She put the letters back and locked the desk. She heard steps along the passage. The door opened.

"Captain Raynour, my lady," said Emmett. Lady Billy gasped and turned white, almost as

white as her visitor, but without the ghastly red patches that his fevered face showed to her.

"Oh, Captain Raynour," she gasped.

"Yes," said Raynour. "You didn't expect me, of course, but I want to see you."

They had played the game of old, in the time before Jack Bexley came on the scene. She knew — none knew better — that Raynour had been Renée's lover. She knew — and still none knew better — that Renée was his mistress once again, now that Jack had been discarded and had gone his way. The game she had played about the boy, she had played about the man. She had covered up the intrigue of her friend, for her friend's sake and for the sake of borrowing from her, and knew how things really stood without any doubt whatever. These three had dined together, gone about together, been to the theatres together, played bridge and the devil together. She had borrowed money of Raynour. She and Arthur had cheated him at cards. And then he had gone out to what he called "the land of the curse of God." She had seen Renée (much to her astonishment, be it known) in an agony of rage and despair at his going. She had seen her recover, and had seen (oh, not without amazement and disgust) how Jack had been installed in the exiled lover's place. And now the man was back

again, looking ill and dreadful, and was Renée's lover once more.

"You want to see me? Oh, yes. But one moment."

She left the room and called to Emmett.

"If Mr. Bexley calls, show him into the drawing-room and ask him to wait," she said, breathlessly. She went back to the room.

She was not gone a moment, but even in that moment Raynour, who was as much alive and as quick as a hawk, had tried her desk.

"They're here," he said, and then she entered the room again.

"I'm so sorry," she began, "but I can only give you five or ten minutes, as I've a most important engagement to keep at half-past —"

If she could only get him away before Jack came! If these two men met, what would happen?

Raynour laughed very strangely.

"What, can't you give an old friend like me more than that, Billy?" he asked. In the old days, they were Billy and George, just as it had been Billy and Jack.

"Oh, I would, but I can't," she cried. "You must come again some other time."

Raynour lay back in his chair. It was nearer the door than the chair in which Billy sat.

"Billy, I shall never be in this house again," he said.

He spoke with some hidden meaning. It touched her mind quickly that he was thinking of Renée. Perhaps he had really discovered something about Jack and his mistress.

"Why do you say that, Captain Raynour?"

"It used to be George," said Raynour, pointedly.

"Why do you say that?" she insisted, without paying any attention to what he said. "Is it — have you quarrelled with — Mr. Buckingham?"

Raynour's eyes blazed.

"Oh, you know we always quarrel, and always did."

Billy was still loyal to Renée.

"Oh, I know nothing!"

Raynour sneered.

"You know everything, and always did. There's no need for me to tell you anythin', my lady."

She insisted.

"I know nothing, and want to know nothing."

"Bah!" said Raynour. His eyes blazed, and for the first time her instincts told her that he was not wholly sane. She drew back from him. He leant forward and fixed his eye on her face, and saw her pale under his glance. He laughed a most unpleasing laugh, and dared to put his thin, yellow

hand on her knee. Her mouth opened, but she said nothing.

"I don't want to detain you," said Raynour, suddenly. He jumped to his feet, and went to the door and locked it, and came back to her. She tried to get up. He was brutal and thrust her back into her chair.

"Sit down and listen," he said. She had to listen. Certainly the man was mad, capable of everything.

"Oh, oh!" she whimpered. Her courage went. He bent down to her and she felt his hot breath.

"Now then — give me those letters!" he said. "Give them to me, be quick!"

She caught her breath and snatched at the arms of her chair. How could he *know* she had them? It was true he had said so to Renée, and even to her, but that must have been the merest suspicion, or a bad joke. She made an effort.

"Oh," she said, "and you dare to wonder why I'm not friendly with you. You dared to tell Renée I had stolen some letters from —"

"From Jack Bexley, by God!" said Raynour, "and so you did, and I want 'em, and I'll have 'em by all that's damnable. Fork them out, woman, or I'll kill you!"

"Good heavens, you're mad," gasped Billy. "I

haven't got them. I swear I haven't. I swear it."

He burst out:

"Oh, you liar!"

The gross insult fetched the blood to her face, and brought back some strength to her.

"Go," she said, "or I'll ring for help."

Raynour smiled.

"Then you are a fool as well as a liar. Can't you see I mean to have 'em at any price?"

She felt his hot and dangerous breath again.

"I haven't got them," she screamed, feebly. "I haven't, I haven't."

Raynour slapped his hand on the desk.

"Open this, and show me!"

"I—I won't," she stammered.

"I'll break it open," said Raynour. "I tell you they're there."

She piped feebly that they weren't.

"I'll have 'em if I have to strangle you," said Raynour. "I'll not give you a thousand pounds for 'em!"

That was a stroke; it was hard, direct, and went through her weak guard. She gasped:

"A—a thousand pounds—"

"You blackmailin' scum!" said Raynour.

"That's what you wanted from that poor boy Bexley!"

"Oh," she said. "How —"

"Listen," said Raynour. He had a good memory. The letter had burnt itself into him. He repeated it almost word for word, and Billy screamed out:

"Well, I am in distress, and I thought he would help me."

"You clever liar," said Raynour. "What about the other message you sent him typed?"

"I — I — never —"

Raynour broke out.

"Give me the letters, woman, do you hear?"

She had wanted him to go before Jack came. Now she wished Jack were there. If he came, they might quarrel. She might get out of it. She tried for time. He might come at any moment.

"Oh, you are wrong. I did write to Mr. Bexley for money. I'm in great distress. We shall be turned out of the house. But I don't know what you mean about a typed message. I sent none, and I've never seen the letters, I swear it."

But Raynour did not listen. He looked around the room and then at the fireplace. He saw a sharp-pointed poker there and took it up. Billy cowered.

"Oh, you'll not strike me!"

"Sit down," said Raynour, "or I'll kill you!"

He looked as if he meant it, and he did mean it. He went to the desk.

"I beg you, oh, Captain Raynour," she implored.

He turned on her like a savage.

"Sit down, do you hear?"

She heard and did not move, as he put the point of the poker into the desk and broke it open with a crack. The letters lay in a bundle right before him. He took them up, and her discretion went. She flew at him and caught hold of them. He turned on her and struck her hard on the face and cut her lip. She fell in a heap on the floor and moaned.

"I said you'd got 'em," cried the madman. "There they are right enough. You had better have given 'em me at once, you thief."

He was as white as death, save for the red patch in his cheeks. He opened the packet and read a paragraph of one of the letters. She looked up and saw his face, and watched it with horror. This was a man capable of anything. He was capable of anguish!

"My God," said the man from the land of the curse of God, "she wrote these!"

He looked down at Billy with strange eyes.

"Oh, you poor thing," he said, suddenly. "I'm sorry I hurt you, you poor, mean, greedy thing. Why didn't you give 'em to me at once? Now I'll go!"

He unlocked the door and then turned to her again.

"Do what you like about this," he said. "I care for nothing now. But — I'm sorry I struck you, very sorry."

He went out quickly, and she lay upon the floor sobbing. She had lost what was worth a thousand pounds! It was gone, and she could say nothing, do nothing!

The clock struck the quarter to four. Jack might knock at the door at any moment. She crouched on the floor with a bloody handkerchief to her lips, thinking, thinking, thinking. It was possible, oh, even yet it was possible, to get the money from him, and give him nothing in return.

"I've lost it, lost it twice over," she moaned. Then there came a knock at the outer door. She sprang to her feet, pulled down the blind to darken the room and hide her swollen face, and sat with the light behind her. Emmett came in, for she knew Captain Raynour had gone.

"I've shown Mr. Bexley into the drawing-room, my lady," she said.

"Let him come here," replied Lady Billy. She hardly knew what she did or what she said. The sudden loss of the letters, and the savage blow given her by the man who had taken them, made her foolish. Indeed, for a moment she had been actually stunned. If she had retained any presence of mind, she would have kept Jack waiting until she had in some degree recovered herself. But when he came in, she was shaking. She had arranged no plan; she was in danger of tears, even of hysteria and a lamentable crisis of nerves. She kept her handkerchief to her bleeding mouth and mumbled strangely.

He, too, was in a state of nervous tension such as he had never experienced in his whole life. What he should do or say, how he was to get at the truth of all that lay at the back of this strange attempt to borrow money of him, he did not know. It seemed impossible, the moment he entered the house, that Lady Billy really had the letters, after all. And yet —

"Oh, Mr. Bexley," said Billy. The next moment she burst into tears. She could not have helped it for her life, and yet she felt in her misery that it would have been hard to do anything better. The sight of her weeping gave Jack the feeling that this could be no such woman as Raynour believed. She

was really in some great distress, and had turned to him for help. He would try to help her.

"Oh, what's the matter?" he asked. There was a ring of sympathy in his voice, for he was sure she was not the creature Raynour said. Raynour was mad. "What is the matter, my dear Lady Billy?"

She sobbed out that she had fallen down and hurt herself badly.

"See," she said, holding up the stained handkerchief, "I fell just now against the desk."

She had not noticed that when Raynour burst the lock open, he had splintered the woodwork around the lock. Jack saw this, but for the while thought no more of it.

"I'm awfully sorry," he stammered. This was not what he had expected.

Lady Billy held out her hand.

"It is so good of you to come," she murmured. "I'm sorry I'm in such a state. And I'm so miserable."

Her misery gave her leave to cry at her ease. It comforted her. Jack said again that he was sorry. Wouldn't she see a doctor?

"A doctor! Oh, this is nothing," sobbed Billy. "I'm in such despair."

That she was in despair gave a ring of truth

to what she said. Jack believed for a moment, for many moments, that she had meant nothing by her letter over and above its obvious meaning. The anonymous letter was nothing, and Raynour was wrong.

"Cheer up," he said more comfortably, "cheer up, my dear Lady Billy —"

"Oh, you are my friend, are you not?" she asked, sobbing. "We used to be friends, you know, and now —"

"Of course," said Jack. "Tell me what's wrong?"

She dabbed at her swollen mouth, and told him how she was threatened with disasters. Her husband had behaved badly, and was likely to become a bankrupt.

"He actually ill-treats me," she said, and, as she said so, she thought, "He will think Arthur struck me."

He did think so.

"The brute," he cried. "Did — did he strike you?"

She shook her head.

"No, no," she said. It was a plain "yes," as she said it. Let it go at that!

"The beast," said Jack. "But in your letter you said you knew that there was some —"

"Oh, yes," she put in, "some one threatens me. It's not about myself, but —"

She stopped and looked at him, and then added:

"About *her*, you know, partly. They say, oh, I can't tell you what they say, but it's about you and her and me, too. It's dreadful."

She was strangely confused, for now she believed that she had recovered.

"About me and Mrs. Buckingham?" he demanded, fearfully.

She nodded.

"And they say I knew, and I knew nothing."

"There was nothing to know," said Jack.

"Oh, of course, but if they say it! She says there was nothing, but that you and she quarrelled about — about something."

"Yes," said Jack, and, as he thought, wondering what she meant, his eye was on the desk again. If she fell against the desk, how could she break it like that? This was what he asked himself deep down beneath his active mind.

"How can they threaten you?"

"I — I love her," said Billy.

Jack knew she did, if she loved any one.

"But she can —"

He paused.

"She can what?" asked Billy, still weeping a little.

"Do they want money?" he asked, suddenly.

"That's it, of course, dear Jack."

So she used to call him.

"She can pay it, then," said Jack, with the first hint of brutality she had ever seen in him.

"She can't," said Billy, "she's at the last gasp. Mr. Buckingham quarrelled with her about your innocent friendship with her, and she can't get a penny."

Jack grunted. If Renée was threatened, not through him, let her suffer.

"She's got jewels," he said, sulkily.

"Mr. Buckingham took 'em all," lied Billy.

"He's a beast."

Jack grunted again.

"But why are you in danger?"

Billy lifted her hand.

"Not in actual danger, but, if they threaten her, I feel it. I must help her. Can you help me? I don't ask for her only, I'm in actual want. We shall have to leave the house. It's dreadful."

Her head ached fiercely.

"Who are they?"

"They — oh, I can't tell you."

She told him then.

"Your husband, by God," said Jack.

"No, no, no," she moaned. It would be good to let him think so. "Don't say so."

Jack believed it was Arthur Rayley. Rayley had struck here, and there was the desk.

"What about my letters, her letters?" he asked, suddenly. Perhaps, after all —

"Those that were lost?" she asked, with her handkerchief to her eyes.

"Yes."

"I don't know. But I believe I know who's got them!"

Evidently Arthur Rayley had them. Jack grew hot and indignant, and suddenly went cold. They had been in the desk and her husband had stolen them, broken it open: she had interfered and he had struck her. But for her to have had them meant that George Raynour was right. Oh, Jack felt warmly that he was no such fool, after all. He jumped to his feet, and pointed at Lady Billy.

"You had them!" he cried.

She protested with tears.

"How can you say such a thing?"

Jack pointed to the desk.

"Who broke it open?"

"I fell on it."

Jack grinned savagely.

"Who broke it open?"

She protested feebly with tears, and Jack saw the pointed poker in the fireplace. He could use tools, and had a sense of them that comes from use. He took it up and saw the dint in the desk where it had bruised the wood.

"Rayley took 'em from you, and you stole 'em from me," said Jack, as he flung the poker down. "And you want money out of me, you thief!"

She fell back in her chair.

"How can you say such things?" she cried, feebly. "I—I didn't. Oh, I'll tell you. Arthur gave me a packet, sealed, to take care of for him. I don't know what was in it. He broke my desk open, the beast, and took it and some money."

Rayley was capable of it, Jack believed that. But how could Rayley have stolen the letters? Part of this was a lie.

"You stole 'em, if he stole 'em from you," said Jack. "I'll find him and break his neck. Raynour told me you stole 'em and wanted to sell 'em to me, and I believe he's right."

She sat rigidly and shook her head.

"Oh, it's dreadful of you," she moaned, "and I'm in such distress. I am, I am, oh, Jack, I am!"

"Tell me the truth, and I'll give you fifty pounds," said Jack, suddenly.

She sobbed out that nothing less than a thousand was any use to her.

"You can't get it from me," said Jack. "I've not got it. If you'll tell me the truth, I'll help you with fifty."

"I can't," she screamed, "I can't! It's others."

"Did you take the letters?" asked Jack. "Come, tell me."

"No, no."

Jack took out his pocketbook. He had twenty pounds in five-pound notes in it.

"You took 'em," he said.

"No," said Billy, "no!"

There was no thousand pounds for her. But even less —

"You took the letters," said Jack.

She shook her aching head.

"Who made you do it?" asked Jack, thinking it possible that that little beast, Arthur Rayley, had done so. She leapt at the suggestion.

"Give me, lend me, a hundred, and I'll tell you the truth," she panted. Her eyes were on the notes in his hand.

"I'll do it," said Jack. "Out with it."

He was no boy now, but dominant and savage. He stood above her.

"Tell me quick."

She caught at his coat-sleeve.

"Listen! It's true, I took them. Arthur made me. He's a beast. I had to do it, because — well, I did. He took them from me when I got here. I begged him to let me give them back again, and I stole them afterward from him."

"Is that the truth?" he asked, suspiciously.

"Yes, yes," she said.

"Is it all the truth? Where is he now?" he asked.

She shook her head and made as if to speak, but said nothing.

"I'll find him," said Jack, in a fury.

She kept her eyes on the notes.

"Here's twenty, — I'll send you a cheque," he said, with bitter contempt.

But he still held them.

"That's not all, no, it's not," she said, suddenly. If he found she had lied, as he must in the end, she would lose even that poor hundred.

"What is it?" he demanded, savagely.

"It wasn't he that broke the desk open," she began.

"Who, then?" shouted Jack.

"George Raynour," she sobbed.

Jack fell back, and sat down staring.

"George Raynour!"

She nodded at him.

"Yes, Raynour."

"When?"

She burst into tears again.

"Just before you came. He broke the desk open, and struck me in the mouth, and hurt me horribly."

"My God!" said Jack. "My God, woman, why didn't you say so at once?"

He sprang to his feet.

"He'll kill her!" he said, in a whisper. "He'll kill her!"

He thought of Renée, and saw Raynour's face, — the face of a man who was mad in the strangest way, who didn't mind the lover, but was insane about the letters his mistress had sent to another man.

Jack seized his hat.

"The money!" gasped Billy.

"Take it," said Jack. He threw the four notes in her face, and left the room and the house. She heard the outer door slam, and fell upon her knees to grovel for the money.

Then she burst into tears again, and sobbed as if her heart would break.

CHAPTER XIX.

WHEN Jack Bexley left Billy's house he took the first hansom he saw, and told the man to drive as hard as he could to Woodley Gardens. What he meant to do, or wanted to do, and how he meant to do anything, he could not tell. His rage with Raynour for deceiving and fooling him was modified by his very amazement at the way it had been done. Raynour was mad, no doubt, and madness meant, in so innocent a mind as his, mere blundering and stupidity. That a madman had been so clever, so quick, so entirely adequate to a remarkable and probably unparalleled situation was more than he could understand. Now he did not trouble to try and fathom the psychology of a mind so diseased as to desire to read those letters. The fact that stared him in the face was that George Raynour, a clever and inexplicable lunatic, had got hold of something which would, as Jack's instincts told him, make him even more dangerous ~~than~~ he was already.

"He'll kill her," said Jack. He said it again and again. He felt sure of it.

"It's all my fault," he said. Through his folly Renée was put in a most frightful situation, and was in actual danger of her life. If Raynour did anything desperate the whole affair would come out; the letters would come into court; Cecilia and his mother would know the truth, and his marriage would never take place.

As he drove the short distance from Wilton Crescent to the Gardens he lived, perhaps, through his worst hour. For when he was half-way, the coward, which lurks in the simplest and bravest man, as the hero does in the veriest cur, bade him shirk his duty and let the whole thing go. What were Raynour and Renée to him, and why should he suffer for them? He had, he knew, been treated damnably: she was worthless, Raynour not to be helped or dragged from the pit. It was possible that the letters would never be known as the cause of any tragedy. He knew that it was not the custom of English courts of law of any kind to give away those who were not directly implicated in any such dreadful drama. A very little influence, such as old Cassilis, for instance, might exert, would ensure silence on that point. It was Jack's first real temptation, and it says much for him that

he no sooner saw the chances of securing his own safety than he put it aside.

"I---I can't," said Jack. "I can't! If Cissy throws me over she must!"

He felt certain she would. What else, he asked, could so sweet and pure an English girl do?

And then he drove up to the Gardens. He was amazed that there was no crowd about the place, so fast and far his mind had travelled, so much it had seen. He had anticipated the tragedy so dreadfully that a cry of "murder" in the road would not have surprised him. He saw Renée lying dead, saw Raynour gibbering — did not madmen always gibber? — beheld the very room a pool of blood.

He paid the cabman hastily, and ran up-stairs to the first floor, on which was number 63. He saw the valet Dickson, standing outside Raynour's door. The man was obviously agitated. He turned to Jack with relief.

"Oh, sir, I'm glad you've come," said Dickson.

"Why, why?" stammered Jack. "What's wrong?"

Dickson was shaking.

"I don't know, sir, but Captain Raynour —"

"Yes?" said Jack.

"I think he's mad, sir," groaned the valet. "I went into the flat and found him shouting."

He caught Jack's arm.

"You can hear him now, sir," said Dickson.

Jack listened, and could hear Raynour talking loud.

"What was he doing?" he asked.

"He had some papers, sir," said Dickson. "The floor was covered with 'em. When I came in, he came up to me and took me by the throat, sir, and said things I couldn't understand about my knowin' all about it, sir."

"About what?" whispered Jack.

"I think he meant Mrs. — the lady, sir, that comes here," said Dickson. Oh, he knew all about it, that was true. But even now Dickson was discreet: he knew not only about her and Raynour, but about her and Mr. Bexley.

"Will he let me in?" Jack asked.

"He put me out and locked the door, sir," said Dickson. "I was glad to be outside, sir. If I was you, I wouldn't go in."

It would, perhaps, have been wiser not to try, but Jack was wrought up to doing what he ought to do, not what was wisest.

He knocked at the door, and heard Raynour's voice cease. He had been reading the letters aloud. He came out into the passage. The outer door was of coloured glass. Jack saw his figure show darkly.

"Who's there?" asked Raynour. His voice was strangely modulated: it had a peculiar sweetness in it. Something in the accents of the man made Jack's blood run cold. He felt the truth with his stimulated mind. This was the voice with which Raynour would have called the woman in! It was as if Jack heard him say, "Who's there, is it Renée, my darling?"

"It's I," said Jack.

He heard Raynour cackle with sudden laughter.

"You? Bexley?"

"Yes," said Jack. Dickson stood away from him, and even went down a step or two.

"Don't go in, sir," said Dickson. "I'll — I'll go and fetch the manager!"

But he stayed.

"I don't want you," said Raynour through the glass. "Go away, boy, go away! Go home and be good!"

He laughed again.

"I'd like to have a talk with you," said Jack.

"You can't," replied Raynour. "I know you'd want 'em, and you can't have 'em. I've got 'em, old chap."

Jack shivered.

"I know," he said, "and I don't care if you have. I say let me in."

"What do you want?"

"I want to talk to you."

Raynour hesitated a moment.

"Go away," he said, "go away."

He laughed again.

"If you came in I might do you a mischief. Go away, boy."

Raynour had his struggle in that moment. For one passing instant he desired to let Jack in. It was not wholly kindness to the young fellow that restrained him.

He said to himself:

"They'd get me before I saw her!"

That's why he said, "Go away, boy!"

Jack made one more effort.

"I give you my word I only want to see you for a minute, Captain Raynour. And I don't want the letters, if you won't give them to me. Lady Billy —"

"What about her?" said Raynour. "Don't talk to me about her! If you're wise you'll go."

Dickson pulled him by the sleeve.

"He's got a revolver, sir, I know he has. I'm afraid. Come away, sir."

Raynour touched the handle of the door, and Dickson made a bolt for the floor below. Jack stood still.

"All right," he said. "I'm going, sir. Good-bye."

It was useless to stay, and worse than useless. There was only one thing to do.

"Good-bye, old chap," said Raynour. He clapped his face against the coloured glass. Jack saw him green and yellow through it. He looked horrid, odd, ludicrous; his nose was flattened. He laughed again.

"I must warn her," said Jack. He went down the stairs slowly, and Raynour went back to his letters.

"What shall I do, sir?" asked Dickson, when Jack joined him on the ground floor.

What could he do?

"There is nothing you can do," said Jack.

"Isn't he mad, sir? Don't you think he's mad? There's a great change in him since he was here before, sir."

There were reasons for it.

"One can't say he's mad," said Jack. He stared at the little valet vaguely. "Has he been drinking, Dickson?"

Dickson shook his head.

"Not to speak of, sir," said the valet. "Not a circumstance to Mr. Smith above him. He do drink

somethin' terrible, and is very quiet with it. But I ain't afraid of Mr. Smith."

"Don't go near Captain Raynour then," said Jack. "He'll calm down. I know he's had some trouble."

"Oh, yes, sir," said Dickson. He knew it, too.

"I'll do what I can, and I'll come in again later," said Jack. He gave Dickson half a sovereign, and walked into Victoria Street. He heard Big Ben strike five. It was only an hour since he had called at Wilton Crescent.

He walked past Buckingham Palace and up Constitution Hill, for he was going to Renée's house.

"I must warn her," he said. "She mustn't see him now."

He went into Hyde Park, and walked to and fro in front of the house for ten minutes. Again he had a struggle with himself. And again he overcame. He went into Park Street and rang the bell.

"Is Mrs. Buckingham at home?" he asked.

She was not at home.

"Do you know where she is?" asked Jack. The footman knew him well enough.

"No, sir," said the man.

Jack gave him five shillings.

"Are you sure?" he asked.

"I really 'ave no hidea, sir," said the footman.

"Give me an envelope," said Jack. He stepped inside the door, and, with a pencil, wrote on a card:

"For God's sake don't go near Captain Raynour. He got those papers from Lady Wilhelmina."

He dropped the card into the envelope, and addressed it to Renée.

"Please give that to Mrs. Buckingham as soon as she comes in," he said, very quietly.

He walked back to his club, and as he went he saw on the bill of an evening newspaper: "List of Birthday Honours." He bought the paper and read through the list. At the bottom of those who were to be members of the Upper House he saw — "Mr. James Buckingham to be a Baron." So poor Jimmy, "not a bad sort really," as Raynour said, had reached the height of his ambition, and though the least of the great, yet was great indeed! Jack sighed and was sorry for many things, even though he had much reason to be sorry for himself.

He found it impossible to go back home, so he sent a telegram to his father to say that he was detained in town, and hoped to come back early on the morrow. He dined in solitude with a poor appetite, and wondered if there was anything he could do. But there was nothing to be done, as it seemed, and he went and walked in St. James's Park, after he had sent a cheque for £80 to Lady Billy. He

had promised it. Let the woman have it. Perhaps this would be the last of the affair. Raynour would have time to cool down. Renée would get his note, and would be wise. On Thursday he would be married to Cecilia. Once more the incurable optimism of youth worked in him and gave him help.

And yet his mind was dreadfully uneasy. Though he went back to the club in Pall Mall he could not stay there. He walked into the park again, and found that even against his will he was drawn toward Woodley Gardens.

"I'll go and have a look to see if it's all right," he said. "Dickson will be able to tell me."

Again he saw the bills of the evening papers, with "List of Birthday Honours."

"He'll be awfully pleased, poor chap," said Jack. He was glad for the "poor chap," and sorry.

And that night many were glad and few sorry, for Jimmy Buckingham had few friends and many enemies, as all must who tread the world down in their relentless efforts to "get there."

CHAPTER XX.

RENÉE BUCKINGHAM did not get Jack's card that night, for she had been up the river with a party, and had enjoyed herself wonderfully. Every one knew now, even though it was not yet public news, or news in the public prints, that Buckingham had been raised to the peerage by the high favour of the Prime Minister and the king, who looked with pleasure on so rich a man and so admirable a specimen of the best Englishman. She was to be Lady Ullswater, so they said, though the title was not settled.

She had risen from a Colchester gutter to such a dizzy height at last.

"Oh, yes, of course I am glad," she said. "My husband deserves it."

He had given the Conservative party a great deal of money. He had made biscuit manufacture a fine art, and had invested jam with a rare merit. He owned the bodies and souls of thousands, and sweated them with discretion. There had been less worthy peers, perhaps would be less worthy ones.

She was happy, curiously happy and content. Her husband was the provider, and he provided well. Since his little spurt of jealousy about Jack (he had long since decided that there was nothing in the affair) he had crawled to her and been obsequious. He had asked Raynour to dinner to please her, for she had told him a terrible story of the man's sufferings in Nigeria. He believed in the Empire, for the Empire was a market. He sent jam into all the corners of it.

"He's a very good fellow," she said.

She had forgotten her passion for Jack. He had been an episode — while Raynour was the true Epic. She let him tread on her, and knelt before him. There was something primitive in her, which responded to his brutality which was not always latent.

"I just love poor old George," she said. The ancient scandal about him began to revive, not a little on account of Cassilis, by the way. But she was careless, and grew more careless still. She even ceased to trouble about the letters, for Lady Billy persuaded her that Jack had them, and meant to keep them.

"Let him keep them," she said. "I don't even like him now."

When the river party got back to Paddington, her friends bought her a paper in which the Hon-

ours List was printed. They congratulated her again, and almost cheered her as she drove away in a hansom. She had intended going home, but, by reason of the streak of satiric devil that was in her nature, she changed her mind.

"I'll go and see George first," she said. "I said I'd come and didn't mean to, but now I will."

She wanted to pose before him as the peeress, for these honours were for her but so much more gorgeous raiment for the *gamine* that she was. He would say bitter things, and his bitterness was something piquant to her. She wanted to sit on an armchair with her legs over the side, and smoke cigarettes with him. He was the only person she knew that she could be herself with. He was the only soul that knew her, the only soul who could strip her soul naked.

"I don't know why I love him," she said. And yet she did know, even when he made her cry, as he often did. He knew her. She was at her ease with him. He tortured her and himself about Jack. It was a horrible pleasure to her that he knew about Jack. She sometimes grovelled before him. She knew he wanted to see the letters. That he was so morbid as to desire this gave her exceeding pleasure. She repeated to him what she had written, or what she said she had written.

"You're a liar," said Raynour. Once he twisted her ear till she screamed and cried. If she could love any one she loved him.

She came to the Gardens and dismissed the hansom. She knew she had two or three hours if she wanted them, for Jimmy would not expect her till late, even if he went home early himself. She actually said, "poor old Jimmy," as she walked up to 63.

She knocked at the door lightly and touched the bell. In a moment George Raynour opened to her. The inner hall was dark. She saw his face like a whitish mask against the gloom.

"You see I've come," she said, and Raynour put his hand out and took her by the wrist and drew her in. That he was silent and strange did not alarm her. There was almost always something different about him, and that gave him his charm for her. One day he was amusing, even brilliant, another he was cold and biting, on the next savage and uproarious. At other times he could be quite kind and gentle, and she sat on a little stool at his knee while he told her strange stories of Africa and India.

So that he now drew her in without a word did not disturb her.

"I'm a peeress, George," she said, laughing. The

inner room was dark, but not so dark but that she could see the floor was strewn with papers.

"What *have* you been doing?" she asked.

He let her go, and still never spoke a word.

"What —" she began again, but his silence was so strange that she stopped without finishing. She went up to him, and suddenly he caught her in his arms and kissed her face and mouth and eyes. He was savage and brutal, and she sighed with pleasure.

"Oh, George!"

She heard him groan, and broke away from him and stood back.

"George, what is it?"

He answered nothing at all, and she shivered with swift alarm. He was stranger than ever; her deep instinct warned her, and she began to get afraid. She dropped her light cloak on the floor, and heard it rustle among the papers.

"Won't you speak to me?" she whispered. The room grew darker and darker as the daylight died. She ran to him weeping.

"You — you frighten me," she panted. "What's the matter? What is it?"

She touched him and felt that he grew rigid. Her hand was on his arm; she felt that the rigidity passed, and that he began to tremble.

"My God, what is it, George?"

She whimpered as she spoke.

"Why is it so dark? Turn up the light," she cried. He struck her hand from his arm and went to the door where the switch was. But she heard the key turn in the lock before the light blazed suddenly in her face. What did that mean? She trembled and felt her knees weaken beneath her as she turned and saw his face.

"Oh," she said, for this was not the face of her lover, but the face of some one strange and bitter. It was George, but not her George Raynour. She lifted her hands and tried to speak, and the words failed on her drying lips.

He was as white as a sheet but for the fierce red patches of colour in his cheeks. His very lips were white and his eyes were furious. They searched her brutally without any pity; they stripped her soul; they tortured her. She tried to smile, and only contorted her face. Then she smiled mechanically and pitifully, seeking some way out.

Her feet rustled among the papers on the floor. She saw his eyes move. They seemed to burn her very feet. She shifted her position uneasily. Her skirts rustled among the papers, and she looked down.

The light was strong, for he had turned all the

switches on. By the glare she saw her own writing, and she looked at the man swiftly without meeting his eyes. For she knew they were the eyes of a man who had lost his mental balance. They were fixed, dilated, horrible, and peculiarly disconcerting.

"Ah," she said; it was as if she sighed. For she understood, and wanted to stoop and pick up one of the letters. They were the letters she had written to Jack, she knew that. How had he got hold of them?

Now she saw that she was in a trap, — that she ran dreadful risks. She took swift counsel with herself. She must not touch the letters, that she knew. She must not refer to them. She prayed rapidly to some God, asking for aid. The door was locked; the window shut. It was a dreadful fall from the window to the basement. But she kept her head for awhile, knowing that if she lost it he would break out. She held her head straight, and looked at him at last.

"I'm very ill," she said. She staggered as she spoke. It was half a dreadful piece of acting and half-real. She had heard of murder, and now her mind told her that there was murder in this man's face. She was amazed to think that he had known all about the boy, and yet had not seemed to care so much. These letters — oh, why had she ever

written them? George had read them. The accursed papers rustled under her feet again.

She spoke suddenly.

"George, give me a little brandy! I'm — I'm ill!"

And Raynour laughed. It was a sound to freeze the blood of a strong man. It turned her to stone, for she knew he was beyond any appeal.

He spoke, too. But before he spoke he stooped and picked up a letter.

"You — you beast," he said.

Yes, they were horrible letters for him to read. She knew that.

She spoke rapidly in answer, feeling she must keep his mind on her, directly on her, on her mere presence; not on her acts, her deeds, her vile unfaithfulness, here witnessed to so foully.

"George, I'm ill. Don't be cruel to me. You know I love you; that I wanted you to stay with me; not to go to that awful place. I implored you not to go. George, I implored you. I said I was so lonely. I wanted your help, I loved you, I love you now. For God's sake be kind to me. Don't look at me like that. My God, George, George!"

His eyes dilated horribly, and then he held up the letter and began to read it.

"Don't," she whispered, "don't!"

He chose a dreadful letter. It was gay and bright and laughing. It was luxurious, sensual, amorous. She said shameful things in it to Jack. She reproved him for his being jealous. She remembered it as Raynour read, and suddenly recalled that there was something in it about George.

"Don't," she shrieked. "Oh, George, don't!"

He crackled with wild laughter and read on in a queer, high voice that suddenly became hoarse and deep, that peculiar and unmistakable sign of insane rage, which might make even those tremble who had never heard it.

"Don't ever speak again in the way you did about Captain Raynour," George Raynour read, "you know one can't help men falling in love with me. I liked him, of course, but he was a fool, and could never, never be to me what you are, dear, oh, my dearest lover."

The letter went off here into the things of sensual love, phrased here and there not without some beauty. The touch of poetry in some of the phrases seemed dreadful now, for they maddened the man who read them. He flung the letter down, and ran at her. She fell upon her knees.

"My God, George, don't," she screamed. But he did not strike her yet.

"I've read 'em all," said Raynour, "all of 'em,

every word! While I was rottin' out yonder, you wrote 'em, and you wrote to me as a woman might to her husband. I'd my duty to do in hell, and I did it, and your letters were all I had. I've got 'em now, and these are his. Oh, you liar, you beast!"

She caught hold of his knees.

"I love you," she said, in a dreadful, dry voice, "I love you. Forgive me, oh, you must."

She wondered if the key was in the door. She looked past him and saw that it was. She walked upon her knees and got a little nearer to the door. If she could only get near enough to open it.

"I loved you," said Raynour, in a lamentable voice. "I loved this woman, oh, God, and she was my life, and she's written these letters while, in that swamp of hell, I made her an angel! I adored her body and her ways, and she sucked the soul out of me, and the honour of a soldier and a man. And now —"

He cried out and threw his hands up in the air. He fought with a blind passion, saw the lights turn strange colours, saw a mist, and saw her face in it. He struck at her with a howl, and she shrieked frightfully. In the mist of his madness he lost her for a moment. She crawled, bleeding from her forehead where his rings had cut her,

crawled to the door. As she crawled she shrieked again: "Murder," and again "Murder" and "Help"; for now she knew that murder was in him, and feared that she would die. But ere she reached the locked door, he got her by the hair, and pulled her back. She screamed again and knew that people heard, for overhead there was trampling, and men ran in the passage. Raynour grunted things unintelligible and let her go. He looked at the door, and fell back from her. There was sudden hammering at it, for some had come in through the outer door. Renée screamed again for help, and she hoped for it as she screamed. But she saw Raynour run to the other end of the room to his desk. At that moment she got to her feet, and fell, and got to them again, and once more fell at the very door. She saw a panel split from the blow some one gave it outside. She got her hand on the very key. And then she saw the man with his revolver in his hand. Her muscles gave way; she fell limp. He raised the weapon, and ere she could even scream again, she saw a blinding flash, and was stung through and through by a sharp, intolerable pain. She put her hand to her side, and saw his face emerge out of the smoke. It was devilish, satiric, his face, and not his face! He laughed. She saw him look at her, saw his face waver, saw

it break and dissolve, and she fell back in a dead faint as the door was broken in.

And those who broke it in saw George Raynour lift the weapon to his head, and saw him fire it.

Among those who saw this, and among those who picked up the wounded woman was James Buckingham.

And as he went away, leaving his wife in the hands of doctors, he saw young Bexley walking quickly into the Gardens. And Jack saw him, too. The face of the new baron was white as death.

"What, what is he doing here?" Jack thought, nervously. "What can he be doing here? He looked dreadful."

He stared after the cab. Then he noticed that there were many people in the street, many more than he had ever seen in that quiet backwater. He turned the corner, and saw a crowd outside the staircase on which number 63 was. He heard the strange sibilant murmur of a crowd. There were policemen there.

"Oh, what?" said Jack.

Two men passed him. They were talking excitedly.

"Dreadful," said one, "dreadful business."

What was dreadful? No, no, surely nothing had happened!

If anything had happened it must be that Raynour — then he stopped. He caught a messenger boy who passed him hurriedly.

"What is wrong, boy?"

"Murder, sir," said the boy. He ran on, leaving Jack holding to the rail. At the next door, the doorway for 62, he saw Dickson with as white a face as Buckingham's.

"My God, she never got my note," said Jack.

He ran into the crowd, and was stopped by a policeman. But Dickson saw him, and came to him. Before he could speak the crowd spoke with horrible unction.

"They're bringing out the body," said the crowd.

"Who is it?" asked Jack.

"The captain, sir," said Dickson, bursting into tears.

"And —"

"She's not dead yet," said Dickson, wringing his hands.

CHAPTER XXI.

JACK leant against the railings, as they brought out the body of the man he had known, and Dickson, whose nerve was utterly gone, clung to his arm, forgetful of his obsequious duty in the sudden presence of death. The poor fellow cried pit-
eously.

"Oh, sir, he was very kind to me," he said, "he was very kind to me." He wailed persistently that Raynour had been kind. But Jack was full of other thoughts, though he, too, knew that poor George Raynour had been kind and gentle in his heart.

"When did *she* come?" he whispered to the valet.

"I don't know, sir," said the valet.

"Why didn't you stop her?"

But Dickson had had other things to do.

"Do they know who she is?" Jack asked.

Yet how could they if Buckingham had not told them? Now Jack saw that Buckingham must have opened the envelope he left for Renée.

"Did Mr. Buckingham say?" he asked. "Were you there when he came?" Dickson nodded through his tears.

"Yes, sir. I saw him. He must have told the police. He was very white, sir, and he looked at the lady — on the *floor* she was, with two doctors at her — like as if he was stunned, sir. He gave the sergeant a card, and whispered to him and went away. *Did* you see him, sir?"

"Oh, I saw him. Will she die?"

Dickson, who knew nothing, said she would.

"The poor captain was very kind to me, sir. But I knew there would be trouble," said Dickson.

He touched Jack on the arm.

"Will you be in it, sir?" he asked. "What was them letters about?"

He knew all about everything. That was sure.

"They'll 'ave me at the inquest," said Dickson, "but I won't give you away, sir, if I can help it."

He meant well, but Jack shrank from him. This was the horror of it all, that such as Dickson knew the truth.

"I must go," he said.

He gave the valet a sovereign, and red-eyed Dickson thanked him kindly.

"Send me word to my club how *she* is," said Jack. He walked away with his head bowed.

"It will all come out," said Jack.

Such news runs fast, though no one can say how it runs. It was too late for the evening papers, though not too late for swift rumour. By the time Jack got back to Pall Mall, all the clubs had the news in some form or other. He fancied men looked at him strangely. They knew he knew the Buckinghams. Many knew that there had been a nascent scandal about him and Renée. He heard the name Buckingham mentioned. One man asked him if he had heard that Buckingham had been killed. Was it true? Before Jack could answer, another told the true story, and Jack left the room. They knew everything but the truth of the letters.

"I don't know what to do," said Jack. "I wish the governor was here."

He wondered if there was any one who could advise him, and then he thought of Cassilis. That was the man, if there was any man, in spite of his love of talk. He took a cab to the Temple, where the bachelor Cassilis lived, and by a lucky chance found him in, for the King's Counsel had had a tiring day and was reading a novel. He put it down when Jack entered.

"What's wrong?" asked Cassilis. There was no doubt that something was wrong, for Jack's face proclaimed disaster.

The young fellow sat down, and in a low voice told all that had happened. Cassilis listened quietly and nodded at each point. When serious things happened, he was a very different man from the chattering Cassilis of the clubs.

"He's dead, you say?"

"Oh, yes," said Jack.

"And she —"

"Dying," said Jack, with tears in his eyes and voice.

"It's an awful business," said Cassilis. "Why did you come to me?"

Jack looked at him.

"I wanted advice," he muttered. "You see, I am to be married on Thursday."

"Ah," said the King's Counsel. He got out of his chair and walked the room in silence for a long minute.

Then he turned to Jack.

"Do you know your father knew a good deal of what you've told me?"

Jack started.

"About —"

"About — her," said Cassilis.

"No, I didn't," replied Jack.

"We both suspected," said Cassilis, "but I knew that you and she parted when George Raynour

came back. My boy, we must have your father up."

Jack nodded.

"If you think so, sir."

"We'll send him a telegram," said Cassilis, and the two went into Fleet Street together.

"He'll be up the first train in the morning. I know what you want, my boy, and I think it can be done all right. Was there anything in the letters to show who they were written to?"

Jack thought not.

"They were not in the envelopes?"

Jack had destroyed the envelopes.

"I dare say you can be kept out of it," said Cassilis. "For your sake and the sake of the young lady, I'll do my best. If you went to bed, do you think you could sleep, Jack?"

Jack did not think so.

"Then go for a walk till twelve, and then try," said his father's friend, "and come and see me at ten to-morrow."

So Jack went walking in the night, and found himself an hour later on Hampstead Heath, looking down on the midnight glare of London town. And while he walked, Cassilis did many things for him, for he found out that one paper had hold of the truth, through the indiscretion of poor Dickson,

who had gone away from the Gardens and got drunk. Though the paper would not have mentioned Jack's name, it would certainly have stated the truth about some other man's letters being the cause of the tragedy. From this much might have resulted. Cassilis got this suppressed, and even went to Scotland Yard to see some one high in authority. And when his work was done, he went to his club and enjoyed himself amazingly, even though he heard many suggest the real truth of the matter. In fact, many knew or had constructed something not unlike the actual facts.

Jack's name was freely mentioned.

"Pooh!" said Cassilis, with a bitter sigh at not being able to enjoy the fruits of his knowledge, "pooh! If there ever was anything between the lady and Jack Bexley, it was over long ago. Raynour, whom I knew well, was as mad as a hatter."

The news came in at midnight that Renée was still alive. An hour later it was said that she would live some days. Before those clubs which shut at two were closed, it was stated on the authority of three of the greatest surgeons in London that she would probably live. Some said that Buckingham had committed suicide. Others declared that he was watching by the bedside of his wife. Many

said they were sorry for him. They stated it with unction.

"Poor fellow," they said, "and he's in the List of Birthday Honours this very day."

It was lucky for him that the thing had not happened before. His real friends were silent.

At two o'clock, Cassilis, who had forgotten his fatigue, and did not think of the case which waited for him on the morrow, drove down in a cab to Woodley Gardens to make inquiries. He found that Mrs. Buckingham was doing well, as well as any one could who had been shot through the body and escaped immediate death. He saw a sergeant of police there whom he knew. He asked him if he had seen Mr. Buckingham. The husband had not been there since the time of the tragedy.

"I wonder how the poor devil is takin' it," said Cassilis, as he drove back to his chambers. Many asked that question, and many would ask it.

But poor Buckingham was taking it in a way that none would have suspected.

When he saw the note to his wife in Jack's handwriting, his jealousy of the boy returned. There were reasons for this, for Renée had assured him that she and Jack were no longer friends. She had even given her husband the same reason for this that she had given Lady Billy. The young fellow

"had gone too far." Buckingham had believed her, for he wanted to believe her, but when he saw the writing on the envelope, he had doubts, and in a moment of angry suspicion had opened the letter. The contents had amazed him. What could the papers be? Why was Renée not to see George Raynour on this account? In one instant his jealousy was diverted from Jack to Raynour. He determined to get to the bottom of the affair. It was horrible to think that he had risen so far to be confronted once more with doubts as to his wife's faithfulness. He remembered many things about George Raynour now.

"I'll find him," said Buckingham. He was frightfully disturbed in his mind, and all the more disturbed because of his previous exaltation. That day had been the greatest of his career, — a wonderful day. He had come home, hoping to find Renée as pleased as he was to have things definitely settled. He wanted to kiss her and to make up all their differences. He was a peer at last, and she was his wife. Oh, but it had been a great day!

He knew where Raynour used to live, and drove there. They told him that the captain now lived at Woodley Gardens. He drove down there, wondering as he went what excuse he should make for calling on the man. For the first time he saw

clearly that he had no excuse. He stopped the cab in Victoria Street and walked into Woodley Gardens. If he met his wife now!

He heard shouting in the street, saw people run, saw a crowd at the door, and for the moment forgot his wife and Raynour. The passion of the people assembled got hold of him. He was madly curious, and asked with a hundred others, "What is it?"

Some folks said it was a fire. Then a man in the doorway shouted "Murder!" and there was a call for a doctor. It was Dickson who spoke, and Buckingham, being close to him, asked who was killed. The valet told him, weeping then, as he did later with Jack.

"Raynour!" said Buckingham. A deep, strange fear got hold of him. He asked, with dry lips, if there was any one else.

"A — a lady," said Dickson.

"My God!" said Buckingham.

A policeman asked Dickson who the lady was, while he kept the crowd back from the door, and Dickson told him her name as he blubbered like a child.

"Let me in," said Buckingham.

"Stand back, sir," said the constable.

Buckingham took hold of him by the coat, and

whispered to him. The man stared and let him enter. He ran up-stairs and into the room.

Over Raynour there lay a white sheet. By the side of the unconscious woman were two doctors on their knees. She was stripped to the waist; Buckingham saw blood. A sergeant in the room took him by the arm, asking roughly what he wanted. Buckingham nodded at him speechlessly and pointed with a wavering finger at the woman on the floor. He tried to speak, and at last got out his words. He wondered why the room was littered with papers.

"She's my wife," he whispered. He fumbled for his card-case. He saw Dickson at the door again. One of the surgeons said, angrily:

"Keep these people out!"

Another policeman shut the door.

"She's my wife, will she die?" asked Buckingham. He looked at the white sheet, with the figure of that which had been a man beneath it. He shivered horribly.

"I don't know, sir," said the sergeant, respectfully. He knew who Mr. James Buckingham was, and even knew what he was to be. It was a strange case.

"Ask them," said Buckingham, pointing at the doctors.

But the sergeant led him outside, and Buckingham held on to his arm.

"How — how did it happen?" said Buckingham.

That no one knew.

"I'd go home, sir," said the sergeant. "I'll send you word as soon as I hear."

"I can't," said Buckingham.

But he went all the same. He was put into a cab and drove away. He went home, and sat in his library for two hours without moving. The butler came in at twelve, and asked "my lord" if her "ladyship" would be at home that night.

"You and the others can go to bed," said Buckingham. "I'm sitting up waiting for a message from a friend."

At half-past twelve a constable brought him a line from the sergeant, saying that the lady would probably live.

"Damn her!" said Buckingham. He went to the table and poured out a big drink of brandy. "Damn her!"

He walked up and down the room till one o'clock. When the clock in the room struck, he went into the hall and took his hat. He went out quickly and walked down Park Street and Grosvenor Place. His mind was dulled and stunned. It was a dread-

ful business. If only it hadn't come out like this. Just at this time, too!

The night was warm and lovely, for a westerly wind was blowing, and overhead the sky was clear moonlight. He opened his coat as he walked. He found he had a cigar in his hand. He had been carrying it for a long time. He threw it away. When he got to Victoria Street, he found that he had taken another out of the case and was carrying that. He put it into his mouth unlighted. He had the match-box in his hand.

"Damn her and her mother!" said Buckingham. He remembered the first time he had seen her.

"I gave her everything," said Buckingham. He turned down Woodley Gardens, and came to where a small crowd stood. It melted and was recruited again. There were lights in the room of 63.

"She's there!" he said. "I—I hope she'll die!"

He stayed there for a minute, and a man asked him for a light. He gave it to him, and then walked on without knowing where he went.

At two o'clock he found himself standing in the great square by the House of Lords. He was close to the statue of Cœur de Lion, who had also been a very successful man. He looked at the silent Houses of Parliament and at the Abbey. A cab

came through from the Embankment with a drunken man in it singing. Perhaps he, too, was successful. He saw a policeman by the House of Lords. It was a hard place to get into.

"I've got there," said Buckingham.

He walked up-river, past the Victoria Tower, and turned again to look at the place which was so hard to get into. It was a wonderful place, full of men who had been successful, or whose fathers had been. Buckingham clapped his fist into his open hand.

"I've got there," he said.

It warmed him to think of all he had done, all he had overcome. What did anything matter? Then a cold shiver ran through him. If only all this had happened a week ago, he would not have been in the List of Honours this day!

He nodded and put his head on one side.

"I shouldn't," he said, "that's a fact."

It probably was a fact. He gave an odd sort of half-grin.

"But now they can't keep me out," repeated Buckingham. "They can't keep me out."

He walked back past Cœur de Lion, and turned again to look at the place no one could keep him out of.

"I'll give that policeman five shillings," he thought.

He gave it to the man, who was much astonished.

"It's a fine night, sir, thank you, sir," said the constable.

Buckingham walked away with his head down.

"They can't keep me out," he said.

CHAPTER XXII.

It was possible enough to keep poor Jack's name out of the papers, as it usually is unless a man blows his brains out or writes something better left unwritten, but to keep it out of men's and women's mouths was a thing impossible. When Jack saw Cassilis in the morning, the King's Counsel told him as much.

"Every one knows you were in it, my boy, but it won't be printed. On the whole, I can reassure you on that point. But folks will talk; they're talking about the letters already."

Not the least of the talkers was to be Cassilis, for he had earned the right.

"Do they know?" asked Jack.

"Do they?" asked Cassilis. "The very coroner's jury will know!"

It wasn't as bad as that, but it came near it. The great jury of the idlers of London town knew and brought in many verdicts. They talked of nothing else for three days, not even of the dissolution of Parliament, which was rendered certain, so the wise

ones said, by the nature of the List of Honours, in which poor dishonoured Buckingham figured. They talked of Jack and Renée and Raynour over thousands of cups of tea. It was Jack's fault, Raynour's fault, Renée's fault. But they settled on Renée at last, for she was the woman and had been found out. And not least among the tea-talkers was Cissy's friend Amelia. She talked and, alas! wrote also.

"I'm afraid every one will know," said Cassilis. As he spoke, there was a knock at the door and Sir John Bexley came in. He was very quiet and calm, but pale enough. He had two newspapers with him. He shook hands with Cassilis, and sighed at his son.

"You know, of course," said Cassilis.

"What the newspapers say," said the father.

"And I guess more."

"Go into the next room, Jack," said the King's Counsel, and Jack went quietly. He stared out of the window at the trees in King's Bench Walk without knowing what he looked at. Cassilis in the meantime told Bexley everything.

"I don't blame the boy, Bex," he said.

Sir John shrugged his shoulders.

"What is the use of blaming him? It's a dreadful business, though, and it means scandal of an-

other kind for us. I suppose Cecilia Clarendon will hear of it, and the marriage was to take place on Thursday, the day after to-morrow. And there's my wife. She'll take it very hard, for she believes the lad is innocent as a lamb."

Cassilis shook his head.

"It's disagreeable, but it might have been worse," he said, meaning to be consolatory.

"Not much worse," said the father.

"The poor devil might have shot Jack."

That was true.

"Advise me," said Sir John.

Cassilis could always do that.

"Keep a good face, say nothing, and the news mayn't get to the girl till afterward."

Bexley looked at him wonderingly.

"My dear Cass! and afterward —"

"They'll be married. What's Cecilia Clarendon like, — as big a fool as her father?"

She was anything but that, and Sir John said so.

"I'll tell her everything, and leave it to her," said Sir John.

"She'll chuck him, if you do, and he'll enlist, or do something damn silly," said Cassilis. "He's very fond of her, I can see that."

"I shall chance it and tell her," said Sir John.

"I think she may be wise enough to see —"

"Tut!" exclaimed Cassilis, "she'll do what she ought to do, you rely on it. Trust a damn girl for doin' her duty and makin' a thundering mess of it, if she's well brought up."

There was wisdom in Cassilis, after all. Bexley drummed with his fingers on the table.

"I suppose I ought to give Jack a fine talking to, and I shall do nothing of the kind," he said, with an air of defiance.

"Take him out and give him lunch, and get back home," said Cassilis. "He's in an awful state of mind."

Sir John took Jack out to lunch, and made him drink a pint of wine. But the fact that the governor shook hands with him in silence was more than wine to the boy, whose eyes filled with tears. They said nothing of the affair till they were in the train, and then, having a carriage to themselves, Sir John did speak.

"I suppose, my boy, that Cecilia must be told?"

He watched Jack closely, and saw the lad flinch. For a moment Jack did not answer, and Sir John was unhappy.

"Oh, yes, sir, of course," said Jack. But his lips trembled.

His father sighed and was glad.

"It will be a blow to your mother, if she knows," said he.

"Why, oh, why should she?" asked Jack, in the greatest distress.

"We've got kind friends," said Sir John. And yet that was mere bitterness, and not quite fair. Most of the neighbours knew about poor Molly Botfield and the results; but not a soul had had the brutality to tell Lady Bexley anything about it.

"I'll see that she doesn't know, if it can be avoided," said Sir John. "But if Cissy —"

Yes, it depended on Cissy.

When they got home, they both went out riding. Jack went east by himself, and Sir John rode over to Ashwood, meaning to have it out as soon as might be. They would know about the tragedy itself, but of the ultimate causes he thought they could as yet know nothing.

"I'll speak to old Tom first," said Sir John. "I'm not sure but there'll be more trouble with him than the girl. I wonder."

He wondered how Cissy would take it. He felt sure that old Tom, in spite of his pretences of having been a sad dog in his youth, would be furiously moral. He was a typical Englishman, and all typical Englishmen are very moral. They cannot help it.

When he went in, he found Tom Clarendon reading the paper.

"I say, Bexley, this is a terrible business, this. Have you seen this about that Buckingham woman and a chap called Raynour? Shot her, by God, and killed himself, and poor Buckingham made a peer the very day!"

"I've seen it," said Sir John, gravely.

"Jack knew her, I heard," said Clarendon. "What's he think of it? Pretty business, ain't it? Why did they make Buckingham a peer? It beats me, by the Lord. Horrid business for him. What does Jack say? Did he know this Raynour?"

"He knew him," said Sir John.

He was evidently most disturbed, and even so great a blockhead as old Tom could see it.

"Did you know her?" he asked.

"I met her," replied Sir John.

He walked up and down the room.

"What's wrong with you?" asked old Tom Clarendon, curiously.

"A good deal," replied Sir John. "Look here, old boy, I'll have to tell you."

Clarendon stared at him.

"What, by Jove?" he asked.

"It's about Jack and Cissy."

"About my gal?" roared old Tom. "Why, what about my gal?"

Sir John sat down.

"Look here, old chap," he said, after a pause, "I suppose you and I know very well what it was to run a bit wild when we were young?"

"Why, of course; that is to say — what the devil do you mean?" asked Clarendon.

"You and I in the old days were rather wild, eh?"

But Clarendon was suspicious.

"You were a real hot 'un," he said, with caution, "but I was pretty careful myself, except on one occasion. What are you thinking of? I say, have you anythin' to tell me about Jack?"

"That's it," said Sir John.

"Anythin' disagreeable?"

"Damnably disagreeable," owned Jack's father.

"Likely to upset Cissy?" demanded Clarendon.

"I'm afraid it is," said Sir John.

"And the pair to be married the day after tomorrow!" groaned Tom. "What is it?"

Sir John told him the story as he knew it, as he had guessed it, and as Cassilis had told him. As he talked, old Tom walked up and down the room in ever increasing agitation, exclaiming at

intervals, "By God!" and "Well, I never!" And then Sir John came to an end.

"And every one knows?" demanded Clarendon.

"They will," said Sir John.

"Then the marriage is off," groaned Tom.

"I'm sorry, and it's a bad business for my poor gal, but it's off. I thought Jack was moral except for that other little affair which might have happened to any one, and was kept very dark, I must say. I thought he was moral, and here he has been carryin' on with married women. I'm an injured man, Bexley, and my poor gal's an injured woman, and I *do* think you should have told me before."

He almost wept.

"But it only happened yesterday," urged Sir John.

"But you knew of the intrigue before," said Tom. "You say you did."

"I suspected it. But surely you wouldn't throw him over for that?"

"If it was to come out, I would," said the virtuous old boy. "I'm sorry, and it will be an awful blow to Cissy, who is the most innocent gal I know, but the marriage can't take place. It must be postponed and then broken off. And a nice job I shall have explaining it to my poor gal, with all her

things ready and the people invited, tenants and all. It will kill her and will kill me. Oh, Bexley, I've been treated very bad."

He really wept.

"My dear chap," said Sir John. "But suppose Cissy won't break with Jack?"

Old Tom stared at him.

"You don't know my gal," he cried. "She's just like her mother, who wouldn't have a good-lookin' maid in the house, and the older I got, the worse she was, till they were all fifty and one-eyed, or somethin' as bad. Cissy has been brought up all right, and she'll cry her eyes out, but she'll chuck him. She will. And I've got to tell her."

"I'll tell her," said Sir John.

"Oh, will you?" said old Tom. "If you will, I'll take a walk till it's over. And when she's stopped cryin', you come and fetch me at the farm."

"I'll only tell her on one condition," said Sir John, "and, if you won't agree, you must tell her yourself."

"What's the condition?" asked Tom.

"That whatever she says, you'll stick to."

"Ain't I stickin' to it?" asked Tom. "Ain't I sayin' all the time that I won't have her marry Jack? What d'ye mean?"

Sir John put his hand on his shoulder.

"Suppose she says she will marry him all the same."

Tom looked at him pityingly.

"And you think that of my gal, who was brought up by the strictest mother and wife I ever knew? Look here, Bexley, there are times when I'm not surprised that the House was too much for you."

He meant, no doubt, that the standard of intellect in the House of Commons was too severe for Sir John.

"But suppose she says so?"

"Suppose she says her father's a fool," snapped old Tom.

"I'm sure she would never say that," returned Sir John, "but she might say what I suggest. It's a chance."

"Ten thousand to one, I know my gal," said the father; "she's a strict churchwoman."

"Of course. But if she said she'd still marry Jack, would you forbid her to?"

Old Tom put his hands behind his back.

"If she said she'd marry fifty thousand Chinamen, I'd let her," he retorted. "But knowin' Cissy as I know myself, I know she won't say anythin' of the sort."

"Then you are quite ready to leave it to her?"

Tom snorted.

"Of course I am. She'll chuck him, I know it. If her mother had known that I'd as much as winked at a barmaid ten years before I met her, she'd have never been Cissy's mother. And Cissy's her mother over again."

"Then if she agrees, you'll not interfere?"

"Ain't I sayin' I won't?" roared old Tom. "How often am I to say it? If she says she'll stand on her head at Charin' Cross, I'll let her."

"Then it's a bargain," said Sir John. "Where shall I find her?"

"She was in the rose-garden when you came in," said Tom. "Let me look. Oh, there she is! Now you wait till I get away. My poor gal! my poor gal!"

And five minutes later Sir John found Cissy in the rose-garden. She was very pale, he thought, but she received him sweetly. He took both her hands, looked at her steadily, and then kissed her forehead.

"My dear child," he said, tenderly, "my dear child."

She bowed her head and was silent. But when he took her arm, she pressed his arm lightly. She was strangely quiet.

"My dear, I've come over to see you, to talk to you —"

He broke off; it was bitterly hard to speak.

"Yes," she said, "I thought you would come to-day — if you were at home."

He stopped, let go her arm, and turned.

"You thought I would come, Cissy! why?"

"I thought so," she said.

It was strange that she should think so. He looked at her again.

"Look at me, dear," he said.

She looked up at him steadily.

"You are pale to-day, Cissy."

"Oh, yes," she murmured. "But what have you to tell me?"

What did she know? That her mind was swift and keen, he was aware, but what could she have inferred from anything in the papers, even if she had read them this morning?

"A great deal," he said, doubtfully, "if you know nothing. Have you seen the papers this morning?"

"Yes," said Cissy, "I saw that about —"

"About Mrs. Buckingham?"

She acknowledged that it was about Mrs. Buckingham.

"It's a dreadful business," said Sir John. "I

was in town this morning and heard what was said, — things that haven't got into the papers."

"What was said?" she whispered.

He looked away from her.

"You understand so much, Cissy, and I wonder — Cissy, do you really love my boy?"

"You know that," she said.

"He loves you dearly, my dear," said the father, "but he sent me over to you to-day to —"

He paused and held out his hand. She took it.

"To do what?"

Her voice was low but firm.

"To release you, if you desired it."

"Why did he not come himself?"

"I thought it better not," said Sir John. "You don't ask the reason, and you know he loves you, dear. You are sure of that?"

"Quite sure," said Cissy. "Tell me why he has sent you?"

"I've told your father why, Cissy, and he says that you will break with my boy. I'm not so sure, but, if you do, we shall accept it."

"Tell me why?" she said again. "What my father says may be nothing. He does not know me."

She looked at him straight.

"Do I?" asked Sir John.

There was a look of intelligence in her eyes that was an answer.

"I do not know."

She knew much, that was certain. The more he thought, the more he was sure of that.

"I wonder if I have anything to tell you," he began.

She smiled a little wanly. She looked older, he thought.

"There is not very much, perhaps," she said. "But tell me plainly what Jack has to do with this in the papers. I had a letter at twelve o'clock from some one in town."

Sir John threw up his hands.

"So soon!" he said. "Ah, I knew it wouldn't be long. You know, then, what is said?"

"Mrs. Wilson wrote and told me."

Mrs. Wilson was Amelia, who had sat up till two o'clock to write, and then had gone out to post what she had written.

"I will owe her one," said Sir John. "The world is full of very agreeable people, Cissy, who seem glad to make others unhappy. But no doubt she thought it was her duty."

"She said so several times," said Cecilia.

"Her duty. Your father says you will do yours, dear. He also says that you are a good church-

woman, and therefore quite understand what it is."

Perhaps Cecilia did understand.

"Poor father," she said, "it will be a great trouble to him."

Sir John started.

"Then you mean to do it?" he asked. "Oh, Cissy, I thought —"

"What?"

He turned away and stood with his back to her. His hands were behind him and showed his agitation.

"Poor old Jack loves you," he said, "and that woman — Why, Cissy, can't you understand how such a woman — but — but —"

He broke off suddenly.

"I'm an old fool," he added. The tears ran down his cheeks. How was it that she, who understood so much, was now so bitter and so calm? He turned to her, and she held out her hand. The tears now ran down her face.

"I'm sorry, so sorry. Oh, it's dreadful!"

"You understand they had parted long ago," said Sir John. "You understood that?"

She did not deny it.

"Be wise and merciful, my dear," he said. "Jack's a good sort, really, and he loves you."

She looked irresolute for a moment. Then her eyes fell and she murmured something he did not catch.

"What is it?" he asked.

She burst into tears, and caught hold of him. He took her in his arms and spoke softly.

"Oh, my dear, what is it?"

But for long minutes she could not speak. When she did, he was amazed.

"They will read his letters to her," said Cissy, sobbing.

So had the good Amelia wrought, working in the false tissue of rumour, and weaving truth and lies at midnight.

"They'll read them," she repeated. "They'll all read them!"

"His letters," said Sir John. "Oh, ah, by God, Cissy —"

He was breathless. He put her from him at arm's length, and cried:

"Look at me, my dear."

She looked up, wondering.

"Oh, I forgot," said Sir John. "I was held to be wise, and therefore thought I was. And to think so, Cissy, is a great, a fatal, error. I forgot that you were a woman! I forgot it, — that you

were such an amazing and wonderful creature. Oh, my dear!"

He absolutely laughed.

"Oh, Sir John," she cried, and broke from him, staring at him in indignant amazement.

"His letters —" said Sir John. "Oh, my dear, they were not his —"

Cissy flamed up.

"Oh, not his —"

"No, hers," said Sir John, "hers, my dear."

She fell again into weeping, and broke from his arms.

"That's all right, cry, dear, cry, and I'm your new dad, you know. They weren't his."

Cissy sobbed.

"Oh, are you sure?"

"Certain as life and death and roses and the devil," said Sir John; "as sure as that Amelia Wilson is a mewling cat."

"I — I hate her," said Cissy. "She said they were his!"

"They weren't, my word of honour on it," cried Sir John.

She wept again, but more softly. Perhaps a fool might have asked her questions. But, after all, Sir John was no fool.

"You'll know nothing about it, then," he said.
"And Thursday —"

She bent her head.

"It would have broken his heart, and mine, too, Cissy. Kiss me, my dear daughter."

She kissed him, and they stood for a long time silent.

"Dear, we men are fools, you know, and difficult, but, when we marry, if we marry wisely, we marry wisdom. For every true woman has enough for her man, and the biggest fool of a true man has enough for his wife."

He pressed her hand.

"I know nothing about this, then," she said, in a whisper. "Only Jack must know I know. I'll tell my father."

"I'll tell Jack," said Sir John. "I'm afraid of what he'll do if I'm too long."

"Oh, please go," said Cecilia. But even as he went, she caught hold of him.

"Am I wise, my dear father?"

"Very wise, the wisest woman I ever met," sighed Sir John.

"Then you'll do what I ask you?" she demanded.

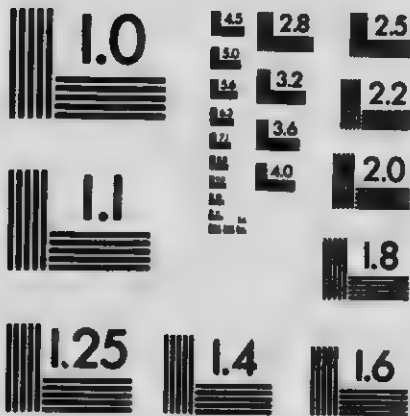
"What do you ask?"

"Jack must have a lot to do," she said.



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"Won't you be enough?"

She smiled through her tears, and shook her head.

"He's to go in the House," said Sir John.

"No, I mean he must do real things," said the daughter of a member of Parliament. "You shall let him have the Big Farm, and make him work."

"Cissy," said Sir John, firmly, "you are, without any doubt whatever, the most remarkable female person I ever met."

Perhaps there was some truth in what he said, for a quarter of an hour later old Tom Clarendon said the same thing.

"You're a very remarkable gal," said Tom, "and I'm damned if I know what to make of you. But have it your own way, Cissy, have it your own way. Your mother wouldn't have been so easy about it as I am."

But it is probable that he knew nothing about her mother.

THE END.

L. C. Page and Company's Announcement List of New fiction

The Flight of Georgiana

A ROMANCE OF THE DAYS OF THE YOUNG PRETENDER. By ROBERT NEILSON STEPHENS, author of "The Bright Face of Danger," "An Enemy to the King," "The Mystery of Murray Davenport," etc.

Library 12mo, cloth decorative, illustrated . . . \$1.50

Mr. Stephens's novels all bear the hall-mark of success, for his men are always live, his women are always worthy of their cavaliers, and his adventures are of the sort to stir the most sluggish blood without overstepping the bounds of good taste.

The theme of the new novel is one which will give Mr. Stephens splendid scope for all the powers at his command. The career of "Bonnie Prince Charlie" was full of romance, intrigue, and adventure; his life was a series of episodes to delight the soul of a reader of fiction, and Mr. Stephens is to be congratulated for his selection of such a promising subject.

Mrs. Jim and Mrs. Jimmie

By STEPHEN CONRAD, author of "The Second Mrs. Jim."

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This new book is in a sense a sequel to "The Second Mrs. Jim," since it gives further glimpses of that delightful step-mother and her philosophy. This time, however, she divides the field with "Mrs. Jimmie," who is quite as attractive in her different way. The book has more plot than the former volume, a little less philosophy perhaps, but just as much wholesome fun. In many ways it is a stronger book, and will therefore take an even firmer hold on the public.

The Story of Red Fox

Told by CHARLES G. D. ROBERTS, author of "The Watchers of the Trails," "The Kindred of the Wild," "Barbara Ladd," etc.

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Mr. Roberts's reputation as a scientifically accurate writer, whose literary skill transforms his animal stories into masterpieces, stands unrivalled in his particular field.

This is his first long animal story, and his romance of Red Fox, from babyhood to patriarchal old age, makes reading more fascinating than any work of fiction. In his hands Red Fox becomes a personality so strong that one entirely forgets he is an animal, and his haps and mishaps grip you as do those of a person.

Mr. Bull, as usual, fits his pictures to the text as hand to glove, and the ensemble becomes a book as near perfection as it is possible to attain.

Return

A STORY OF THE SEA ISLANDS IN 1739. By ALICE MACGOWAN and GRACE MACGOWAN COOKE, authors of "The Last Word," etc. With six illustrations by C. D. Williams.

Library 12mo, cloth . . . \$1.50

A new romance, undoubtedly the best work yet done by Miss MacGowan and Mrs. Cooke. The heroine of "Return," Diana Chaters, is the belle of the Colonial city of Charles Town, S. C., in the early eighteenth century, and the hero is a young Virginian of the historical family of Marshall. The youth, beauty, and wealth of the fashionable world, which first form the environment of the romance, are pictured in sharp contrast to the rude and exciting life of the frontier settlements in the Georgia Colony, and the authors have missed no opportunities for telling characterizations. But "Return" is, above all, a *love-story*.

We quote the opinion of Prof. Charles G. D. Roberts, who has read the advance sheets: "It seems to me a story of quite unusual strength and interest, full of vitality and crowded with telling characters. I greatly like the authors' firm, bold handling of their subject."

Lady Penelope

By MORLEY ROBERTS, author of "Rachel Marr," "The Promotion of the Admiral," etc. With nine illustrations by Arthur W. Brown.

Library 12mo, cloth \$1.50

Mr. Roberts certainly has versatility, since this book has not a single point of similarity with either "Rachel Marr" or his well-known sea stories. Its setting is the English so-called "upper crust" of the present day. Lady Penelope is quite the most up-to-date young lady imaginable and equally charming. As might be expected from such a heroine, her *automobiling* plays an important part in the development of the plot. Lady Penelope has a large number of suitors, and her method of choosing her husband is original and provocative of delightful situations and mirthful incidents.

The Winged Helmet

By HAROLD STEELE MACKAYE, author of "The Panchronicon," etc. With six illustrations by H. C. Edwards.

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When an author has an original theme on which to build his story, ability in construction of unusual situations, skill in novel characterization, and a good literary style, there can be no doubt but that his work is worth reading. "The Winged Helmet" is of this description.

The author gives in this novel a convincing picture of life in the early sixteenth century, and the reader will be delighted with its originality of treatment, freshness of plot, and unexpected climaxes.

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By E. ANSON MORE.

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By THEODORE ROBERTS, author of "Hemming the Adventurer."

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The story tells of the adventures of a young English cavalier, who, left behind by the fleet, finds another Englishman, with his daughter and servants, who is hiding from the law. A French adventurer and pirate, who is an unwelcome suitor for the daughter, plays an important part. Encounters between the Indians and the small colony of white men on shore, and perilous adventures at sea with a shipload of pirates led by the French buccaneer, make a story of breathless interest.

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By T. JENKINS HAINS, author of "The Wind Jammers," "The Strife of the Sea," etc. With five illustrations by W. Herbert Dunton.

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The publishers are gratified to announce a new edition of a book by this famous author, who may be called the Walter Scott of Canada. This interesting and valuable romance is fortunate in having for its translator Professor Roberts, who has caught perfectly the spirit of the original. The French edition first appeared under the title of "Les Anciens Canadiens" in 1862, and was later translated and appeared in an American edition now out of print.

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